

How To Find Your Secret Admirer by fullofwander

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Implied/Referenced Abuse, Love Letters, M/M, Possessive Behavior, Secret Admirer, Slow Burn

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-11

Updated: 2018-03-27

Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:29:25

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 11

Words: 30,695

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Someone's leaving love letters in Steve Harrington's locker. Is it an innocent crush, or something more? And does Steve really have time to deal with this what with his impending graduation and, of course, the upside down?

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Um so this grew from a headcannon on the gc a couple of days ago. You know who you are! I don't really have a grand plan on where this is going yet, so bear with! I'm on tumblr @fullofwander.

Steve jerked open his locker, still fuming from a recent run in with the dickheaded Billy Hargrove. The once idyllic empty locker next to Steve's had been taken over by the new boy when he'd arrived at the school. And now Steve's locker buffer was gone, replaced by an asshole who stood too close, smoked too much, and had a mean habit of saying mean things.

'Hey, King Steve, is that the best you've got? No wonder all your friends abandoned you for me. I think the coach likes me better, too. But don't worry, pretty boy, I'm sure someone like you has no problem making news ones. I heard your girlfriend dumped you too...think she'll let me take her for a ride?'

What an asshole.

As he turned from glaring at Billy's leather-covered back, he saw a folded sheet of notebook paper balancing on top of his books. It was slightly wrinkled with his name scrolled across the top. Pulling it out, Steve unfolded it and began to read.

Steve,

Every day I struggle, hoping to find meaning and beauty in this tiny town surrounded by trees in the middle of Nowhere, America. I see people, hear their laughter, and I feel empty. I ache to find reason for the pain I suffer. My struggles keep me low. Where is the hope for the future? I walk these halls alone. I was never a good student, but now I'm not even seen. Part of the crowd but no one special. It hurts. Up and down these halls, every day, same people, same stories, same problems. Same bruises. I've passed

close by you a million times, my fears seeping out of me like poison. Your bright eyes shine like a blessing. Your presence is a balm, soothing over my rough edges. I want to know what a kind word from you sounds like, how a soft touch feels. I want to feel my hands in your hair, our heartbeats close. I long to watch the stars with you, sing you ballads in your ear. Hear your loud brash laughter in the bright afternoon and your quiet laughter late in the evening. These wishful thoughts consume me during the day and console me at night.

What I wouldn't give to be seen by you.

Your Secret Admirer

Steve's eyebrows shot up, mouth hanging open on a soundless noise. His ears felt hot, his breath short.

Now, Steve was no stranger to love letters. He'd had his fair share of scribbled notes passed in class and giggled over during lunch. But this was something else. This was like a real letter, almost lyrical in its composition. But who would be a writing him something like this?

What the fuck?

"Ready to go?" the question made Steve jump, wrenching him back out of his own head. Nancy was standing next to him, an expectant look on her face and Jonathan at her back. She looked down at the paper Steve was clutching in obvious bewilderment. "What's that?"

"Nothing!" Steve all but yelped, shoving the paper into his notebook and turning to go, a blush unknowingly high on his cheeks. The last thing he needed was his old girlfriend getting it into her head that she could help him find a new girlfriend.

It was strange enough being real friends with her and Jonathan both, now.

"Uh huh," she said, eyebrows raising. Nancy wasn't usually one to let things go, her curiosity making her reach for the notebook Steve was clutching in obvious discomfort.

"It's really nothing!" he said unconvincingly, stuffing the notebook under his arm and looking around the hallway for an escape. His eyes landed on Billy, who was leaning on the lockers halfway down the hallway.

He was also staring. Right at Steve. When he caught Steve looking back, his mouth stretched into a wide feral grin. Vicious, Steve thought with a shiver, turning back to Nancy and Jonathan.

Jonathan pressed a hand to her shoulder when she took in a breath to speak again.

"Come on guys, we have that test next period," Jonathan said, herding her and Steve both toward the classroom.

As they moved away, Steve pointedly ignored Billy's eyes tracking him from across the hall.

The note might as well have been burning a hole in Steve's notebook. He couldn't stop thinking about it and what it meant, staring at the notebook that held it. It took a concentrated effort on his part to pay attention in classes the rest of the day. All he wanted to do was pull out the note and reread it, try to pick up any clues he could about who wrote it.

Was it someone he knew? One of his classmates he was on friendlier terms with? Some freshman he'd never noticed before? Was it Nancy? Jonathan? Hell, what if it was a dude? A prank? Steve was a pretty approachable and currently available guy, so why would they bother with a note in the first place?

Steve's relief was palpable when the last bell of the day finally rang.

He threw his things into the Beemer, slipping on his sunglasses as he glanced at the middle school to watch for Dustin. His fingers itched to get on the road -- the faster he got the preteen home, the faster he'd be able to get back to the note.

Loud metal blared out across the parking lot, guitar riffs and angry singing pulling his attention to Billy Hargrove's Camaro. Dick. After a moment, Steve realized that the other boy was sitting in his driver's seat, cigarette hanging from his lips, staring out across the lot right back at Steve. Again. The stare was intense; Steve felt as if the other boy was attempting to peel him apart. Maybe dig around inside him a bit.

It kind of freaked him out, honestly.

Steve turned his back on the strange look, shifting his shoulders slightly to shake the feeling.

He climbed into his own car as Dustin trotted toward him with a bright grin, once more glancing briefly at the notebook hiding the secret letter.

"Okay dude, what's your damage?" Dustin asked from the passenger seat a few minutes later. Steve startled.

"What? Nothing," Steve said, trying to grasp the thread of the conversation they had been having before his mind wandered off again.

"Seriously? You haven't heard a word I said since I got in the car!" Dustin turned in the seat to face Steve fully, looking worried. "Shit, is it something bad? More demodogs or something?"

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Wouldn't you know more about that than me, dumbass?"

"You're just...you're really acting strange, dude," Dustin marginally relaxed back into the seat. "Is it girl problems?"

"Jesus christ!" Steve exclaimed, half-annoyed, half-amused at his possibly correct guess. "No! And I'm the one who gives girl advice here, not you!"

"Alright, calm down asshole, I was just trying to help," Dustin said with a flash of his teeth, eyes crinkling with humor.

The rest of the car ride passed in a similar blur, though if Dustin thought it was still strange he kept it to himself. As Steve brought his car to a stop in front of Dustin's house, the younger boy couldn't help getting one last dig in.

"You know, if you won't take girl advice from me, you could always talk to Jonathan. He seems to be doing alright with the ladies!" Dustin laughed as he made for the door handle.

"Alright dipshit, get out!"

Later, back in his own room, house silent and empty around him, Steve finally allowed himself to pull out the letter again.

He sat at his desk, smoothing his hand over the lined paper. The note was handwritten in pencil, slight signs of erasing here and there, the writing starting to smudge. The contents of the note itself confused him somewhat. He imagined the person writing it was unhappy and a little lost, but they also found some comfort in Steve's presence. His stomach warmed at the thought.

It wasn't lost on Steve that he had found himself taking on a more nurturing role lately. He enjoyed taking care of the kids, got some sort of fulfillment out of being relied on by his peers and adults. The idea that someone might be out there suffering, alone, when he could be helping them made him...sad.

Never mind the romantic words that made him feel something distinctly more potent.

Steve bent over his desk, rereading the note several times, but he couldn't glean anything more from it. No one came to mind who might fit the contents of it. For all his caring, Steve wasn't always the most observant. After all, he couldn't even see the struggles Nancy had been going through when they were dating, and that was right in front of his face.

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair, making it stand on end. He rubbed his hands over his face, staring out his bedroom

window.

Well, no use worrying about it anymore tonight. Maybe the note was a one-off. Steve wasn't going to make himself crazy over something that might not even be real. He had done that too much in the past, and the future held too many real things for him to worry about now.

Steve carefully put the note in his desk drawer, shutting it, and his thoughts, away.

2. Chapter 2

Steve woke up the next morning decidedly more invested in the school day than normal, despite his attempt to talk himself down from the edge of excitement. He'd spent the night before tossing and turning, his mind circling and circling and never really finding peace. The bags under his eyes were very telling of a night spent not sleeping.

There was no guarantee that anything exciting would happen that day at school. There was absolutely no use getting his hopes up for nothing. Still, he found himself standing in front of his bathroom mirror that morning with his comb and hairspray, obsessing over his volume more than usual.

On the edge of turning his whole look into a crunchy stiff mess and needing a second shower, he stepped back from the mirror and sighed, eyeing his tired face critically.

What the fuck am I doing? This is ridiculous. I'm acting like I'm lovesick! I am going to go back to my room, get my things, and go to school. That's it. People have had crushes on me before. This is nothing new. Hell, I'm sure plenty of people have crushes on me right now! I'm popular and shit. Jesus. Ok. Stop being a dumbass.

He paused on his way out of his bedroom.

This is stupid.

He walked back to his desk, grabbed the note out of his desk drawer, and went out to his car.

Steve glanced over when he heard the locker beside his open with a screech of metal that was way too loud for such a ridiculous morning. The overpowering scent of cologne and cigarette smoke enveloped him, followed by the view of a sharp grin and sharper eyes.

"Hey Harrington, you look like someone kept you awake late last

night. Finally found a replacement for your ex?" Billy Hargrove's voice was low and gravelly, like he'd just woken up and had a smoke or three. He was standing close enough that he was practically purring in Steve's ear, shoulders brushing as they both traded out books. Steve fought the overwhelming urge to step back, shifting his shoulders.

"I don't see how that's any of your business," Steve replied blandly, rifling through his things. Since the two of them had gotten into that awesome fistfight at the Byers' house, Steve had made it his personal mission not to rise to any more of Billy's taunts or jabs, which he carried out with varying degrees of success.

He shoved the book he was holding back into the locker, pulling another out. Then he put that one back and pulled out a third book, staring into his locker with a frown.

"Jesus, pretty boy, you knock your head so much you forgot which class you have first?" Billy was staring right at Steve, watching intently as he shuffled his things. His blue eyes intently traced Steve's face, down his arms, and over his hands digging through the crumpled up papers sitting in the very bottom of the locker.

"Just looking for a pen, asshole," Steve replied, tucking his notebook under one arm.

The locker next to his slammed.

"Here," Billy said shoving a pen in Steve's face. Steve immediately took it out of surprise, blinking and jerking back.

"Thanks?" he said, glancing over at the other boy in wary distrust.

But Billy was already turning and sauntering away, jean-clad ass swaying with his steps. When he got to the end of the hall he turned to look over his shoulder, throwing Steve a slow and feral grin.

Steve startled, the grin shaking him as Billy's grins always do, realizing he had been staring after the other boy.

He looked down at the pen in his hand. It looked like one end had been chewed, fairly aggressively. Steve made a face, pinching it

between two fingers, promising himself that he was going to get rid of it as soon as possible.

He closed his own locker softly, determinedly turning his mind to the day ahead.

His locker had been note-less.

The day passed. Steve sat in class, ate lunch with Nancy and Jonathan, went to basketball practice. Billy was there at every turn, sharp eyes and untamed grin following him, words hot and probing. Each time he checked his locker he got a little more despondent. He had to stop himself, multiple times, from pulling out the note from the day before in front of Nancy accidentally. There was no way he was going there.

This really is ridiculous. Am I so desperate for affection that a few anonymous words are making me lose my mind? Apparently so.

At the end of the day, Steve made one last pass by his locker, feeling like an idiot as his heartbeat sped up. The sharp hope in his chest embarrassed him.

I'm just getting my stuff to go home. That's all.

He opened the door, and this time two folded sheets of paper fell out.

Steve lunged for them, nearly braining himself on the edge of the metal door in his desperation. He clutched at the pieces of paper eagerly, palms damp and an eager smile stretching his face.

Steve,

I'm glad I gave you the last note. I almost didn't. I wasn't sure how you would take it. Not everyone likes the unknown. But i saw your face after opening it yesterday, and I knew you liked it. You were so precious. You're face got all red and you stood there frozen for a few minutes. It makes something in me clench to know I affected you like that. You affect

me in so many ways too. You make my heart beat fast and my hands shake. Whenever I'm near you I want to lean into your warmth, breath in your neck. I have to stop myself from reaching out and running a hand down your spine sometimes when I can see the dip of it underneath your shirt. I love it when you wear blue. the color really looks great on you. Makes your skin glow. You looked so tired this morning. I wanted to pull you into my arms and let you rest against me. I would've held both of us up. It makes me sad to know this is the only way I can tell you these things. I worry about what you would think if I told you these things in person. I don't think you'd like it very much. I worry about a lot of things these days. About my family, about the future. I know you worry about the future too. I've seen you looking at the college brochures. I've heard you complain about the essays. You should know that I think you're smart enough. You should go. Get the hell out of this town that hasn't ever done anything for anyone. It's just a place for people to exist, not to live. You're better than it. Better than me. You deserve anything you want in life, and I have no doubt you'll get it.

Your Secret Admirer

Jesus fucking Christ.

Steve sagged against the cold of the metal locker. His hands were trembling, from adrenaline or something else he couldn't, wouldn't, name. His dry throat clicked when he swallowed.

This letter was so much more than the last one. More of everything. The writing was much more confident this time, the sadness more potent. Steve had the strangest longing to reach out to the author and hug them. Whoever wrote these words felt something potent and deep for Steve, and not being able to reciprocate left him feeling bereft. Shaken, disjointed.

Fuck, I should have waited to read it at home.

“Alright, dude, what the hell is going on?” Dustin said with a look of

annoyance from Steve's passenger's seat. Steve had found himself chauffeuring the younger boy around more and more these past few weeks, a development that he quickly grew alright with, even fond of. He found the younger boy to be amusing, not that he'd admit it to Dustin. Kid had enough confidence to fit an elephant at this point. And he was smart. Really smart. A lot smarter than Steve had been at that age. Maybe even smarter than he was now.

"What?" he questioned, pulling up to Mike Wheeler's house, where Dustin would be spending another evening in a session of D&D. Losers.

"You haven't heard a single thing I've said, dumbass. Again. This is just like yesterday!" Dustin unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to face Steve fully.

"I heard you just fine. Blah blah av club, blah blah awesome hair, blah blah Max and Lucas," Steve mocked.

"C'mon man, I know when someone's deflecting. I'm a master deflector myself. How do you think I managed to hide Dart from my mom the entire time I had him?" Dustin smiled, wide and innocent, the look of a trusting and trustworthy child.

Steve sighed, debating with himself. On the one hand, he didn't really want to share these notes with anybody else. They were proof that someone was actually paying attention to him, saw him outside of his now former basketball king persona. On the other hand, talking to someone about the notes may help him sort out his own feelings. And what better person to do that with than Dustin? He definitely couldn't go to Nancy or Jonathan. What a horrific nightmare that would be. As happy as he was for them (now), there's no way he wanted them in his disaster of a lovelife, or whatever the fuck this was.

Fuck. Fuck it. Dude still hasn't spilled the hairspray secret, maybe he can keep this one too. Dammit. Fuck.

Steve turned off the car, unbuckling his own belt and shifting around to face Dustin so that they were mirroring one another. He drummed the fingers of his left hand on the top of the steering wheel. Outside

the car the neighborhood was quiet, the sun mostly gone and leaving the world in the eerie twilight before full dark. The streetlights were just beginning to blink on.

Steve sighed and bit his bottom lip.

“Someone’s been leaving me love notes in my locker,” he said quickly, all at once on a heaving breath. “Apparently, I have a secret admirer.”

Dustin’s eyebrows shot up. “Shit, seriously? Love notes? Do people really do that?”

Steve just shrugged, feeling overwhelmed and a little giddy at the confession.

“You have them with you?” Dustin asked, clearly intrigued. A sparkle entered his eyes, one usually reserved for traipsing through the woods or digging through the library stacks.

“Yeah, they’re in my notebook,” he said, motioning to the backseat with one hand and pinching the bridge of his nose with the other. Dustin reached around the seat, fishing out said notebook with the two handwritten notes.

Steve cringed to himself as he watched Dustin read through them, making his own set of amused and grossed out faces.

“Wow, that’s some heavy shit, dude,” he said when he’d finished reading. “Someone’s, like, really into you. That second note was especially, um, vivid. It’s a little creepy.”

“It’s not creepy, it’s romantic!” Steve exclaimed. He paused. “I think.”

Dustin just looked at him, nonplussed. “Aren’t you the hot shit that’s supposed to have dated a lot or something? Aren’t you supposed to be a heartbreaker or whatever?”

“Look, all that stuff I told you about relationships is true. But, well, it actually doesn’t happen as often as you think. Or, it does, but the feelings are rarely real. Or something. They don’t usually last very long,” Steve swallowed hard, thinking of Nancy and how she was his

real first love. No one before her had meant anything near as much to him. Now he didn't have that wholesome fulfillment anymore, and it left an aching hole in him.

"Maybe you could help me find her?" Steve asked on a whim, gesturing to the notes still in the other boy's hands. Dustin looked back down at the notes, peering closely at the handwritten words.

"Yeah dude, of course. I'm your guy. But...are you sure this note was written by a girl?" Dustin was tilting it back and forth, squinting in the dying light.

Steve blinked at him. Sure, he'd thought offhandedly about the possibility of the author being anyone, male or female, friend or stranger, but he didn't truly think a guy would write a note to another guy. Especially one so...emotional.

"What makes you say that?" he asked.

"Look at this handwriting. Not to be sexist, but don't girls usually write prettier than this? These letters are big and messy. There's no, like, curly shit or hearts or whatever it is that girls like," he said, holding out the notes.

Steve took them, studying them for the observations Dustin made. Well, fuck.

Dustin fidgeted in the seat next to him, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. After a tense moment, he spoke.

"Would that be a bad thing? If it was a dude?" He spoke quietly, almost gently. Steve looked up into expressively soft brown eyes and shrugged.

"I don't know," he said just as quietly, brows furrowing. They sat there like that for a moment, each lost in thought.

A loud knocking on Dustin's window wrenched them both out of the tense atmosphere.

"Jesus!" Steve said, grabbing the notebook from Dustin and shoving the two notes back in. Will Byers had his face pressed to the window,

laughing at the two of them flailing in surprise. Behind him, Jonathan sat in their mom's car.

"Son of a bitch!" Dustin grouched, opening his door and starting to climb out as Will booked it to the house.

"You're an asshole, you know that?" He shouted at Will's retreating back.

"Hey. Hey, dumbass!" Steve called for Dustin's attention. "Don't say anything to the others about anything we talked about, ok?"

Dustin bent slightly to peer back into the car and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

"I'm serious! I don't want your whole merry band of dipshits knowing." He pointed his finger at Dustin, looking at him through the open door of the car.

"I got it, asshole! I promise not to tell, Jesus." Dustin paused for a moment. "As long as you definitely promise to let me help you figure out who it is!"

"Buddy, I think I could use all the help I can get. I wouldn't have asked otherwise. Now get out, go have fun or whatever it is you nerds do. I'll be back later to pick you up," he said, waving Dustin away and slouching down in his seat.

Dustin closed the car door with a sunny grin and a wave, making his way toward the house. Steve watched as the younger boy crossed paths with Nancy, who reached out and tossed his curls before laughing at Dustin's swatting hand. As she made her way to the Byers' car and slid in next to Jonathan, he tried to convince himself he didn't feel anything.

The two waved at Steve as they drove past. Steve started his own car, sighing as he drove off into the early evening.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Finally got another chapter up! Yay!

Steve arrived back at the Wheeler's house several hours later, takeout containers of diner food waiting in the back seat. The smell of fried grease followed him as he parked and got out of the car, walking up to ring the doorbell.

Mrs. Wheeler answered the door unusually well dressed for this late at night, red lipstick and high heels still on, and let him in with an offhand comment about how the kids weren't done yet. She led him back to the kitchen where a plate of warm cookies sat waiting.

'Odd,' he thought to himself. 'Mrs. Wheeler is't usually the baking type.'

He bit into one, dodging smalltalk about school and college applications. Since he was no longer dating her daughter, Mrs. Wheeler had become awkward to talk to. He never knew quite what to say to her. She wasn't under any obligation to be invested in his life anymore, but he still found her gaze a little too avid for his comfort.

Shifting at the counter, he sighed in relief when the doorbell sounded and she walked away to answer it.

He gave the doorway a weird look when he heard low murmuring and flirtatious laughter from down the hall.

"Mrs. Wheeler, always a pleasure. You look nice, as usual," drawled a very familiar voice, though Steve had never heard it so honeyed. He rolled his eyes.

Christ.

"Oh, Billy, stop it. Why don't you come in? I made cookies! They're just out of the oven," Mrs. Wheeler said, leading Billy down the hallway and into the kitchen where Steve still stood with a half-eaten

cookie.

The look Mrs. Wheeler was giving Billy made Steve's eyebrows shoot up in humor. Suddenly, her outfit made a whole lot more sense. So did the cookies.

Billy came around the corner, smarmy grin landing on Steve and briefly flashing into something a little wider and darker. Then he was back to charm and charisma, assuring Mrs. Wheeler that he and Steve did know each other, quite well in fact. Steve rolled his eyes again, earning himself a ridiculous wink that Mrs. Wheeler clearly found endearing.

"Alright, boys, I'll go down and see if the kids are done yet," she said, disappearing down the basement stairs and leaving the two suddenly alone.

Steve, for lack of anything else to do, took the last bite of the chocolate chip cookie he was holding, licking chocolate from his fingertips. Billy just leaned back against the counter opposite him, crossing his arms and ankles and smirking with a heated glint in his eye, watching him almost obscenely.

"Jesus, Billy, what?" Steve burst out, unable to stand the strange silence, brushing at a spot on his thumb with his tongue.

"Calm down, pretty boy," Billy chuckled, pushing off the counter and approaching Steve. "You just look like you're really enjoying that cookie."

Steve froze, eyes wide and the tip of his thumb still in his mouth, as Billy stopped right in front of him and leaned into his space.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he asked, slightly shrill, pulling his thumb out and leaning his hands back against the counter behind him, attempting to create some space.

Billy reached around him and snagged a cookie from the plate at his back.

"Just getting a cookie. What did you think I was doing?" Billy gave him a wide-eyed innocent look, biting into the cookie he had picked

up, still in his space. Steve rolled his eyes, moving to cross his arms and licking his lips.

“You missed a spot,” Billy said, words practically brushing his face. He reached up a hand and wiped a finger along the corner of Steve’s mouth, bringing it away with a smear of chocolate. “There, good as new.”

Steve watched in abject horror mixed with something else, frozen and eyes wide, as Billy brought the finger to his own mouth and salaciously licked it. They stared at each other from barely inches apart. Steve’s stomach flipped, lip tingling as his eyes following the tongue peeking out before flicking back up to the other’s eyes.

Who would do that? Why would Billy do that? What the fuck?

Steve felt himself lick his own lips again in reaction to the touch, before he registered the action as something that could be misconstrued. Hell, this whole situation could be misconstrued. Fuck.

Steve furrowed his brow, not understanding the situation and his reaction to it.

Fuck. Billy was just being helpful. Yeah. Because that’s just the kind of person Billy is.

Billy smirked, before shifting back across the kitchen and taking another bite of his own cookie. His eyes watched Steve intently, marking every slight movement. His grin relaxed across his face, turning into something more honestly amused. Steve didn’t know what to do, how to react. Where to put his hands.

Thankfully, the awkwardly intense atmosphere was broken by several pairs of footsteps on the basement stairs. Dustin burst into the room, all sunny smiles while speaking over his shoulder. Steve turned toward him, relief flooding him even as he could still feel Billy’s eyes.

Dustin stopped when he came into the room, glancing back and forth at the two teenagers with a strange look. He stood there like he could feel the tension, sense that something had happened. He looked from one to the other suspiciously, giving Billy an entirely too focused and

searching look. Billy hardly noticed, still focused entirely on Steve and seeming to enjoy how uncomfortable he was making him. Contemplation bloomed on Dustin's face, and he turned back to Steve with a glint in his eye.

"What the hell is with that face, man? C'mon, let's get outta here," Steve said, ready to be done with Billy and this situation.

Billy finally turned to Mrs. Wheeler as she made her way back into the kitchen.

"Thanks for the cookies. I love chocolate chip. My favorite. Tastes good," he said, voice low and smooth as he licked his own fingers clean. Mrs. Wheeler blushed and giggled, touching her hair before picking up the plate to offer more.

Steve rolled his eyes, sharing a disbelieving look with Dustin. The two quickly said their goodbyes and exited the house, the sounds of Billy's flirting following them out.

Dustin was quiet as he climbed into Steve's car, the look of contemplation back on his face.

"How have things been with Billy since that smackdown he gave you?" he asked, seemingly apropos of nothing.

"That wasn't a smackdown!" Steve said, personally offended at the thought. "I think I held my own pretty well, all things considered!"

"Dude, he kicked your ass. But that's ok! You're pretty awesome most of the time," Dustin prattled. Steve gave him an incredulous side-eye. "Whatever, that's not the point. How are things between you two since? Any more fistfights?"

Steve thought about it. While Billy had continued to taunt and insult Steve at every turn, standing too close and staring too long, he hadn't been outright violent since that night at the Byers.

"No," he said slowly. "It's like he's just pushing my buttons, but not really interested in having it out anymore."

"Huh," Dustin thought this over. Then, in a sudden subject change,

he asked, "What happened in Mrs. Wheeler's kitchen before I walked in?"

Steve nearly choked on air, the car swerving slightly as he attempted to both whip around to look at Dustin and not react at all.

"Nothing!" he all but shouted, unwilling to turn his mind to it. It was just too weird. And, really, Dustin didn't need to know. Billy had a habit of inserting himself into whatever situation he walks in on and taking over. He liked to dominate a room. But never before had he touched Steve like that. The look burning in his eyes had been evolving and subtly changing for several weeks now, but that was another thing Steve didn't want to think about.

"Here!" Steve reached into the back seat and picked up one of the carryout containers, shoving it into Dustin's hands. "Dinner!"

Dustin, lured by the smell of charred burger and deep fried potatoes, allowed himself to be distracted.

The next day was relatively uneventful for Steve. After the strange encounter the night before, he was reluctant to spend too much time in Billy's company, which led to him avoiding the other boy whenever he could. All it took was a hint of his cologne (and when did he come to recognize his cologne so well?) or the sound of his brash laughter coming down the hall, and Steve took off.

He was so distracted by the memory of watching Billy lick up chocolate that had been on his own mouth that he hardly thought about the secret admirer notes, only giving his locker cursory glances between classes before running off in case Billy showed up again.

'This is ridiculous,' he thought to himself, as he took the long way around the library to get to his last class of the day, a class he unfortunately shared with Billy. It seemed to be a sentiment he felt quite a lot recently. 'What game is he playing?'

He arrived to class just as the bell rang, grateful that he didn't have to risk putting up with any of Billy's bullshit before class.

Unfortunately, the only seat left was the one directly in front of said boy, who watched Steve take a seat with wicked glee.

Billy slouched low in his seat, so low that Steve could see his heavy black boots on either side of his own seat. He suddenly felt trapped, enveloped by Billy, which he tried to convince himself was stupid. It's just his stupid feet, his stupid shoes. Why can't the dickhead just sit normally? Asshole.

He pulled out his textbook, trying to ignore the rhythmic tapping of one boot out of the corner of his eye. A knee nudged his hip, causing him to jump. He looked down at the offender, seriously considering stabbing it with the pen he was holding. He'd been meaning to give it back to Billy, anyways. With a conscious effort he ignored the other boy, determined not to react to him, especially in the middle of class.

His efforts lasted him until he felt a small rolled up ball of paper bounce off the back of his head. He whipped around to glare at the other boy.

"What the hell is your problem?" Steve hissed. Billy looked at him through heavy-lidded eyes, his head resting on the back of his chair. His grin was slow and crooked as he sat up, bring his face close to Steve's. He glanced down at Steve's shirt, a royal blue Ralph Lauren polo. Billy's liquid eyes trailing over the fabric, his neck, his face. Steve felt his skin heating, but he wasn't going to back down. Asshole.

"Nice polo, fucking prep," he sneered, nose wrinkling and clearly meaning the last as an insult.

"Was that all you have to say?" Steve asked, rolling his eyes.

"Steve! Billy! Pay attention!" the teacher snapped from the front of class. Steve turned back with a scowl. Behind him, he heard Billy settle back in his seat then begin scratching at something in his notebook. Dick.

When the bell finally rang Billy shot out of his seat, heading out the door without looking back.

'Odd,' Steve thought, halfway between relieved and...something else.

Billy was nowhere to be seen by the time Steve got to their stretch of lockers, but Steve was reluctant to assume that he'd left already. Even the folded note fluttering out of his locker only made him pause for a moment, mind briefly switching gears before the paranoia reasserted itself. He grabbed the note along with his other things, stomach fluttering wildly as he walked out to his car, oscillating between excitement and wariness. His stomach settled somewhat when he got to the parking lot and realized the Camero was already gone.

Good. One thing I don't have to worry about, then.

He relaxed into the driver's seat, slowly opening up the new note.

Hey Sunshine,

You seemed to be in a bit of a daze today, floating along without much attention. I can't help but wonder if something happened. I hope it was a good memory that kept you occupied all day, and not a bad one. I noticed you wore blue today. Was it for me? When I saw you in your blue shirt this morning, I had to keep myself from coming up to you, crowding into your space and demanding your attention. I practically avoided being near you all day long. That shirt looks too good on you. It brings out the red in your cheeks when you're happy, or angry. It makes your big doe eyes seem even more luminescent. Today it made me notice your moles and freckles. How have I never seen them before? Dotted along your neck like droplets of chocolate. I wish I could lick them up. I wonder how they'd taste, if they'd be sweet. I almost stole a taste of you once, but I knew it'd be the wrong move. I wish I could take care of you, in so many different ways. I want to wrap you up in my arms when you're sad. I want to give you the affection I can see that you crave. I see the way you take care of that kid...the one with the curly hair. You give and give. Who takes care of you? You deserve so much more than you get. You deserve so much more than me writing you these notes. You deserve more than me. It's so hard to communicate like this. You can only read these notes, and there's no way for you to respond. Every day I say to myself that this is the last time I'll write to you. That you deserve someone who can come up to you in person and offer you all that I wish I could. But then I see you, and I

can't help but give in again. So I'm going to leave it up to you, my sunshine. If you are alright with me continuing to write to you, wear yellow tomorrow. If you don't wear yellow, I'll take the hint. You won't hear from me again.

Hopefully,

Your Secret Admirer

Steve sat in a daze, note pressed against the steering wheel. He was glad he'd been sitting down. The words washed over him like warm syrup, wrapping around him and seeping into his bones, warming him from the inside. He could feel the heat in his blood, racing through his veins. He tugged self-consciously on the hem of his shirt -- his blue shirt. It was mostly accidental. He'd put it on that morning without a thought, but had realized what he'd done before he left the house. Still, he'd worn it to school, wondering what would happen. Well, now he had his answer.

God, what the fuck was he doing?

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Omg, so many people commented begging for Steve to wear yellow. I'm just blown away by the comments. I definitely stole this idea from a trashy romance novel I read over the summer that I can't remember the title of now. This woman was a librarian and she had an outreach program at a prison, and one of the inmates had the hots for her and kept sneaking these notes into her stuff. But she couldn't respond because, hello, prison, her job, etc. So he would tell her to wear different colors to mean different things. It was actually a pretty cute read. So that's where the inspiration came from for the whole "wear a yellow shirt" thing. As always, I'm on tumblr @fullofwander. Anyhoo! On to the story!

Steve sat in his room the next morning feeling completely unsure of himself, unfolding and refolding the note from the day before. The decision had seemed so easy last night. Hell, he'd even slept well, boosted by the pretty words and confident in himself. Now, though, in the early morning light of a new day, he couldn't help but second guess his original feelings.

Does he wear something yellow and admit to himself and this mysterious other person that he likes the notes, or does he not wear yellow and possibly lose this already tenuous human connection?

He sighed, his stomach queasy with anxiety, and stared at the two different shirts sitting next to him on his bed.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I almost stole a taste of you once, but I knew it'd be the wrong move.

That line, what did it mean? A kiss? Had someone almost kissed him recently? Surely he'd remember something like that. Surely he would've felt the charge in the air. Like lightning before a storm.

His thoughts briefly flashed to Billy in Mrs. Wheeler's kitchen, but he firmly turned his mind away from that. Not going there.

Steeling himself, he made his decision and grabbed a shirt before practically fleeing the room.

Thankfully, he had Dustin with him that morning to distract him on the way to school. Nothing put Steve in a better mood these days like listening to the younger boy go on and on with a big sunny grin and warm, happy eyes.

"So, you're cool with coming with us tonight, right?" Dustin asked. Since it was Friday, the Party had convinced their parents to let them go roller skating at the local rink. Of course, Steve was enlisted as a chaperone, which he was increasingly ok with.

It had been awhile since he'd been skating. The rink was often a popular hangout for the local high schoolers, since it was one of the few public places that groups could gather for long periods of time. But since he'd been on the outs with his old crowd for a while, he'd had no reason to go lately.

"Sure, buddy. Sounds fun," Steve said, and he mostly meant it. Why shouldn't he enjoy hanging out with a group of people he liked who also liked him, even if they were all younger?

"I think Nancy and Jonathan are going to be there too. That's not going to be too weird, is it?" Dustin looked to him curiously.

"Nah man, we're good. They're good together. I'm happy for them. And honestly I think they're my best friends now," Steve said as casually as he could muster. Dustin just looked at him with sad soulful eyes. Steve huffed, shaking his head.

"C'mon, don't look at me like that. It is what it is," Steve said.

"Hey asshole, it's not like I don't understand," Dustin said, wrinkling his nose and tugging at his curls. Steve's heart gave a lurch for him, thinking of Max and Lucas. At least he'd gotten the chance to date Nancy, unlike Dustin with Max.

"We'll get 'em next time, buddy," he said in what he hoped was a

reassuring tone. Dustin's face turned back into a slow smile.

"Hey, so did you get another note?" he asked eagerly.

"Nope," Steve answered, maybe too quickly, scratching at his neck. There was no way he was sharing the latest note with Dustin. He just...he couldn't. This one was too personal. The first two notes were passive, but Steve wearing a blue shirt the day before had opened up a means of mutual communication, almost. And Steve wasn't sure he was ready to share that with anyone, even Dustin. It felt too telling of Steve's emotional state. And if Dustin read the latest note, he'd ask Steve about his shirt today. He glanced down, once again worried about the decision he had made.

"You know that's a nervous tick, right?" Dustin asked, motioning to Steve's hand. "When you scratch at your neck. It can also be a sign of lying." He gave Steve a sly look.

"Shut up," Steve grouched, jerking his hand back to the wheel.

It wasn't until he pulled into the school parking lot and saw a dark blue Camero sitting there that his mind finally circled back to Billy and his odd behavior. Billy was leaning against his driver's side door and taking long drags of his cigarette. Dark aviators hid his eyes; sunlight glinted off the earring dangling halfway down his neck. He seemed to be waiting for something or someone, shoulders and expression tense.

Great, another thing to worry about today.

Dustin spotted Billy too, his eyes going thoughtful, but the boy stayed quiet as he exited the car. Steve climbed out of the car as well, giving a wave to Dustin as he booked it for the middle school.

Billy watched Steve with what felt like intense predatory stillness, face smoothing out and lips stretching into a sharp grin as Steve tugged self-consciously at his hair. He clenched his jaw in aggravation.

Steve determinedly turned toward the high school, warm yellow shirt bright in the winter sunlight.

Steve spent the whole day staring people down. Every time he turned a corner or entered a classroom he'd watch intently, glaring almost, to see if anyone else was looking back at him. He tried not to get too twitchy, but knowing that someone else knew what his yellow shirt stood for made him almost breathless from the butterflies.

"I haven't seen you wear that shirt in ages," Nancy commented at lunch, twisting Steve's stomach even more.

Steve choked on the bite he had taken, too flustered to know how to answer that.

"Yeah, it's...I...I pulled it out of the back of my closet," Steve answered lamely, scrutinizing both her and Jonathan's faces for signs of...recognition, or something.

What if it was one of them?

It didn't help matters that Billy stared at him from afar all day long, either. Whereas the other boy usually swung between trying to get a rise out of him and ignoring him completely, today he just stared, always on the peripheral. Steve assumed this was some new tactic to get under his skin, but he hated the timing of it.

At one point between classes, Steve leaned against his locker and watched as Billy ploughed right into another student in the hall because he wouldn't take his eyes off Steve. Steve burst into laughter as the two tumbled to the floor, books flying. Billy got up swinging and swearing, teeth bared in a feral flash as he towered over the student still on his ass. He turned from the scene, continuing to chuckle as he made his way to the next class.

Thankfully, Steve managed to get a seat on the other side of the room from Billy during their last class, but he could still feel the other boy's blue eyes on his back. At one point he turned around and shot Billy a bird, trying to shake him into breaking his scrutiny. Billy just smirked and winked exaggeratedly, before turning to write in his

notebook.

The intensity of his feelings stayed with him all day, as did his determination to catch someone reacting to his shirt. By the end of the day he had more than one person giving him looks ranging from vaguely worried to full on freaked out.

He shuffled to his locker after his last class, exhausted from his hypervigilance, and with no concrete results. His mood soared, though, when he opened his locker to find another note.

‘Jesus Christ,’ he thought. ‘I’m really in it deep if just seeing a folded up piece of paper makes me swoon like this.’

Swoon. What a stupid word. Yet, as he stood there, heart pounding and knees trembling with adrenaline, he couldn’t help but use the word. Fuck.

He shouldn’t let himself get attached like this. He was going to end up either disappointed or hurt. Or both. Steve knew himself better now. Gone were his days of playing the field, of being satisfied with meaningless flings. Nancy had changed all that, mostly for the better, he thought. But it meant that he couldn’t help but be wary of these new feelings for someone he didn’t really know.

Enough of this bullshit. He had to give Dustin a ride home, then get ready for tonight.

He grabbed the note and headed out to his car, determined not to think about it until he was home where he could read it in peace.

Hey Sunshine,

You can’t imagine how happy I was to see you in yellow today. Fuck, you were radiant, the early morning sunlight dancing on your hair and shoulders and eyes. You have no idea how much I wanted to kiss you in that moment. Take you in my arms and make sure you knew you were mine. Make sure everyone knew you were mine. I wish I could put a mark

on your neck that's in the shape of my mouth. Sorry, that's probably a little too possessive. But I can't help but feel that way. Anytime someone looked at you today, they'd see you in that yellow shirt because of me. For me. It made my heart pound. It was as if I were draped over you all day long. Did it feel that way to you, too? I can't help but want you for myself, even though I don't deserve you. I still don't know so much about you. And you don't know anything about me at all. Nothing in this world would make me happier than to lay out on the hood of a car and watch the stars with you. To crawl into the backseat and cuddle with you. To make love to you. Sorry, again, if that's too much. I doubt I'll ever get to say it to you in person. I just want you to know how much I want you. How much I want to get to know you. Truly. Seeing you in that yellow shirt this morning, knowing that it meant you were ok with receiving my letters? I've never ached so hard. But it made me realize I do have to admit something to you. Something I'm terrified of saying out loud. Something that keeps me from approaching you face to face. I'm a guy. I know that's probably something you don't want to hear. I understand if that makes you uncomfortable. I never want you to be uncomfortable. How about we do it like this. It's Friday now. On Monday, if you're still ok with me writing to you even though I'm a guy, wear a green shirt. Green for go.

With all the hope I have in my heart,

Your Secret Admirer

Steve sat in the Hendersons' driveway in a daze, waiting for Dustin to appear. Steve was...stunned. Yeah, stunned. He and Dustin had talked about the possibility of the secret admirer being a guy, and after rereading the notes he could find hints of a more masculine voice. But he hadn't actually thought that another boy would like him like that. Would be willing to write him the things that had been written. It made him shiver, hot and cold in turn. He didn't hardly know his own mind.

Did he care it was a guy? Did he? Could he still feel this intense connection, even though it was to another boy? Fuck, he was so

fucked.

Fingers snapping right in front of his nose finally jerked him back to the present. When had Dustin climbed in the car?

“Hello, asshole. Earth to Steve,” Dustin drawled.

Steve stared at him blankly for a moment, before coming to a decision.

“Here!” Steve kind-of-shouted, reaching to his backseat and digging out all the notes from his notebook, throwing the folded up pieces of paper at Dustin. “The notes from yesterday and today!”

It was like an addiction now; he couldn’t stop carrying them around.

He drove in silence as Dustin read the notes, half-terrified of glancing over and seeing the younger boy’s reaction. Several minutes passed, long enough for even a slow reader to go over the four notes a few times.

“I thought it was a guy,” Dustin eventually said evenly.

“That’s all you have to say?” Steve asked incredulously. “I’m kind of freaking out here. You’re smart...talk me through this!”

“Well, first of all, I can’t believe you’re into this lovey dovey shit. It’s, like, straight out of one of Mike’s mom’s trashy romance novels,” he started.

“Not helpful,” Steve interjected. “And how do you know what’s in Mike’s mom’s trashy romances?”

Dustin pointedly ignored him, face turning pink.

“Ok, so the big question at this moment is, do we care that it’s a dude? So, do you?” Dustin said with an innocent smile showing his new teeth, open curiosity in his kind eyes. Steve was glad they stayed kind. Non-judgmental. It spoke leagues about the boy’s character. Not for the first time, Steve found himself idly thinking that Dustin would grow up to be a good man.

"I don't know," Steve said, lost.

"Ok. Do you care that sometimes two dudes like each other like that?" Dustin backtracked.

"No," Steve answered immediately.

"Do you care that a dude feels that way about you?"

"...no."

"Could you feel that way about another dude?"

Steve was silent, contemplating. It's not something he'd ever seriously thought of before. Could he? After several long minutes, Dustin handed the notes back.

"You don't have to answer now. Just think about it. According to today's note, you don't have to answer until Monday. And really, you don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with. If on Monday you're still unsure, don't wear green. Sure, you might lose these notes, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything about you and who you like. Just give yourself time to think," Dustin spoke in a low, smooth tone.

"You're good at this, ya know?" Steve said, smiling weakly over at him. "C'mon, we gotta go pick up Lucas."

The parking lot of the roller rink was fairly busy when they got there, loud music and flashing neon and black lights marking the entrance.

Steve followed Dustin and Lucas inside and to the skate rental booth, the two younger boys talking animatedly as they picked up skates and made their way over to the table some of the Party had snagged. Steve made his way to Jonathan and Nancy, who were laughing to each other in amusement as Mike showed El how to stand up on her skates. The girl took to learning new things like a duck to water, so watching Mike mother hen her had become a source of constant

enjoyment for the group. Mike didn't appreciate it, if the scowl he sent them was any indication.

Steve sat down to put his own skates on. If he was here, he was going to skate, dammit. He watched as Nancy pulled Jonathan out onto the floor, the two laughing and already tripping over each other. His stomach gave a lurch, but it was a decidedly smaller lurch than what he would have felt even a few days ago. Huh.

Excited shouting had him turning back to Dustin and Lucas, who were waving the recently-arrived Max over to their table. Steve frowned as he saw Billy swagger in after her, the neon lights painting his bare chest blue and red and green in turn. Great, just what he needed. More staring. Steve watched as he made his way over to a few of their classmates, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it up. Dick.

Steve turned away and moved toward the skate floor, determined to enjoy himself no matter what.

"You look like a fucking radioactive lemon in this light," a loud voice said over the music into Steve's ear, a cloud of masculine cologne engulfing him before Billy swung into view. Steve's nose twitched. Jesus, did the asshole bathe in it?

Around them people made their way on the endless loop of the skate floor, couples holding hands and competitive kids racing each other. Steve glanced down. Now that's a sight he never thought he'd see. Billy in roller skates. Wow.

"What the fuck do you want from me?" he asked, looking back up. He still had on the yellow shirt, and under the black lights it glowed, luminescent.

Billy just smiled, his eyes full of promises of something, giving Steve a long, slow look down his form and back up again, before reaching out and flicking a button on Steve's chest. Steve slapped at his hand,

offended.

“What are you—,” Steve started, but Billy was already reaching up and giving his side a hard pinch. Steve yelped, flinching, rolling back a few inches on his skates.

Billy threw his head back and laughed, sweat glistening on the long stretch of his neck.

Incensed, Steve came forward and reached out to give Billy a retaliating pinch to his exposed bicep, making the other boy twitch in surprise before grinning wolfishly. It quickly devolved into the two pinching exposed and vulnerable spots and slapping at each other’s hands.

“What the fuck, asshole!” Steve cried out, face heating up, stomach twisting. He felt a laugh bubble out of him in incredulity. What was happening?!

He gave Billy’s shoulder a hard push, causing the other boy to lose his balance. His arms pinwheeled as he rolled backward, a look of surprise on his face, while Steve watched in avid horror. A wayward hand grabbed hold of Steve’s wrist, and the two tumbled to the ground in a pile of awkward appendages.

One of Billy’s elbows hit the ground with a hard smack, and he let out a grunt as Steve’s knee landed in his stomach, narrowly avoiding a more delicate spot. Steve had to throw out a hand to keep his face from slamming into the ground next to Billy’s. Billy started laughing, loud uncontrollable peals bursting out of him. Steve sat up, practically in the other boy’s lap, one wrist still held captive, and couldn’t help but laugh as well.

How is this happening right now? How is he sitting on the floor, surrounded by the feel and scent of Billy Hargrove, and they’re both laughing?

“Uhhhh,” Dustin made a noise from right next to them, looking down at the two still tangled together on the floor.

Steve startled, realizing Billy was rubbing slow circles into his captive

palm with a thumb while the two laughed and stared into each other's eyes. He suddenly scowled, ripping himself away from Billy and flopping down next to him instead.

Billy climbed to his feet, adjusting his open shirt and running his hand through his curls before turning to Steve.

"Need a hand, pretty boy?" Billy chuckled, his laughter dying down but his eyes still dancing. He held out a hand. Steve slapped it away, standing on his own. Billy smirked as he dropped his hand.

"Dickhead," Steve tossed out, before gliding away with Dustin trailing after him.

Later that night, after dropping Lucas off at his home, Dustin and Steve sat in the car, pointedly not talking about certain recent events.

Dustin looked over at him slyly, repositioning his hat over his curls.

"So, Billy--"

"Shut up!" Steve shouted, unwilling to go there right now. Steve just knew this latest incident was going to haunt him for a while.

Dustin mercifully dropped it for now though, laughing as they made their way home.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

So, this one got kind of angsty, I guess? And I got a beta! Many thanks to jgoose13! As always, I'm on tumblr @fullofwander.

Steve woke the next morning in a nervous state, swinging back and forth between worrying about his secret admirer and wondering about Billy. It didn't help his peace of mind when his parents called Saturday morning, fresh with stories of their recent business trip and asking after Steve's college applications.

Fuck. College applications. Most of them had December deadlines, and here he was piddling his time away worrying about his love life. At least that gave him a good excuse to try to not think about the other things going on in his life right now.

He tried to shift gears, spending the weekend revising application essays. Several times he was tempted to call Nancy for help, but she wasn't his anymore and he decided he didn't feel right dragging her back into this particular mess. He remembered the way she'd tried to help with his last essay – her searching eyes as she tried to understand the meaning behind his words. Jesus, this shit was hopeless. He wasn't going to get into college.

Despite the distraction, he still couldn't help worrying about the latest note from his secret admirer. His secret admirer, who was a guy. Whoever he was, he'd talked about cuddling with Steve, kissing him. Wrapping his arms around him in public. It made Steve's stomach churn, but he wasn't sure of the emotion behind it. He'd never had anything against gay people. But did he really want to step into that world? Open himself up to the kinds of problems they had to deal with? Was it even a choice to be made, or did you just wake up one morning and discover you were part of it?

Then there was Billy. Billy, who taunted him with mean words one moment, then the next was making him laugh. Billy, who had beat the shit out of him not that long ago. Billy, who made him dizzy from

the smell of cigarette smoke and cologne when he stood too close. Steve absently touched a finger-shaped bruise on his side, courtesy of a pinch from Billy Friday night.

Steve's head hurt. In fact, it had hurt almost constantly since Saturday afternoon. And now it was Sunday night, he still didn't have an answer for Monday morning, and he felt like he wanted to curl up into a ball and die.

Steve woke up sick Monday morning.

It was really unsurprising, what with all the anxiety and worrying he had been putting himself through, working himself into a tizzy all weekend. He was shivering despite being bundled up and under his winter blanket, and he couldn't breathe through his nose.

He rolled over in bed, looked at his alarm clock, and decided not to go to school.

Fuck it.

It's not like he had an answer for his secret admirer anyways. At least he'd successfully gotten a few applications completed and dropped in the mail the day before, so all his suffering wasn't in vain. Now he could spend the day recuperating (he wasn't hiding dammit) at home.

Steve rolled out of bed and shuffled over the phone, giving Mrs. Henderson a brief call before making a nest on the couch in front of the tv. He spent the day napping, not really waking fully until late that afternoon, head aching and stomach growling. The December sun was just beginning to creep lower as he heated up some soup and ate it in the living room.

Afterwards he went in search of cold medicine, swearing as he overturned all three bathrooms in the house without finding any. Fuck. Fuck.

Steve pulled up to the local convenience store and pharmacy, feeling like he was going to die as he coughed up a lung. As much as he didn't want to be out after dark while sick, he knew he'd be miserable without the medicine and didn't want to risk making it

worse. God, its times like these where he really missed having his parents at home.

A shout from across the parking lot caught his attention as he climbed out of his car.

There, standing in a solid, aggressive stance and facing off against another angry guy, was Billy.

Of course.

Steve squinted in the darkening parking lot. Billy's face was bruised and bloody, his lip split and a decent shiner already forming. A cigarette dangled from bloody-knuckled fingers. He watched as Billy grinned maniacally before flicking the cigarette away and swinging at the other guy, fist landing hard on his chin. The other guy stumbled a few steps before turning and charging at Billy. Behind him, a girl was screaming at the both of them to stop.

Without thinking, Steve took off toward them as they grappled, landing punches to each other's ribs and stomachs. Steve came up behind Billy, grabbing for his arm as he swung back for another punch.

"Billy! Billy, stop!" he shouted, getting a handful of his jacket with his other hand and pulling him back. Across from him, the girl was doing the same to the other guy, who was now sporting his own swelling lip.

"You better be glad your friend was here to save you, asshole!" the other guy shouted, finally allowing the girl to pull him away and to a car.

"What the hell, Billy?" Steve said, exasperated, pushing Billy back before coughing loudly into a fist.

"I had it under control!" Billy shouted, still breathing heavy, panting breaths that fogged in the cold air. He ran his fingers through his curls, tugging at them almost painfully. He wouldn't look at Steve.

"Yeah, that's why you're bleeding!" Steve shouted back, motioning to his lip. He looked on, worried, stomach clenching. Billy gingerly

touched his own face, his fingers coming away smeared in red, a chuckle starting low in his throat before growing louder.

What the fuck is this dumbass's problem?

"C'mon, asshole," Steve said, suddenly exhausted.

He practically muscled a limping Billy into the store and toward the bathroom, avoiding the cashier and grabbing a first aid kit off a shelf as they passed. Why Billy allowed himself to be dragged along, Steve wasn't sure. Billy would have had no problem pushing Steve off in his weakened state; it's not like he could get the other boy to do what he wanted even when he was feeling 100%. Whatever, it's not like the dipshit's actions ever made sense.

Steve locked the bathroom door behind them, reluctant to deal with anyone walking in at that moment.

"What are you doing?" Billy asked, sounding slightly bewildered and off guard, watching as Steve unwrapped and opened the kit.

"What does it look like I'm doing, dumbass?" Steve asked, exasperated and sniffing. He pulled a paper towel and handed it to Billy, motioning toward his face. Billy obediently wetted it and dabbed, leaning back against the counter.

Steve pulled out band aids and ointment, coming to stand in Billy's space and reaching out for his chin. Idly, he noted that Billy smelled more strongly of cigarette smoke than usual. A sign of anxiety?

Billy froze in what Steve assumed was shock, watching Steve with wide, unblinking eyes as he gently touched his face. His hands clenched the counter behind him, his face more open and vulnerable than Steve had ever seen it before.

"I can't believe you were fighting in a store parking lot. So stupid. Look at you," Steve murmured, somewhat to himself, one hand still tilting Billy's chin.

"What? That asshole didn't do this to me!" Billy jerked, motioning to his face. Steve blinked in confusion.

"Then who did?" he asked, stopped up nose making it difficult to breath. He placed a band aid over a cut near Billy's eyebrow.

"No one. It doesn't matter," Billy mumbled, looking away with a scowl. Steve paused, for some reason upset at the idea that this was not Billy's first fight of the day. He swallowed hard.

"What were you guys fighting about, anyways?" Steve resumed, picking up one of Billy's hands unthinkingly and winding some gauze around the busted knuckles.

Billy's hand flexed in his own, the skin cool and dry. Steve didn't want to think about how Billy's fingers felt in his, palms sliding together. He felt like an ice cube to Steve, who was all bundled up. Billy glanced down at Steve's chest, where his jacket was buttoned all the way up and a scarf was looped tight around his neck, and not a hint of his shirt beneath was visible.

"Dickhead was looking at me funny," Billy intoned. The absurdity of the statement, of the whole situation, made Steve chuckle, which in turn made him cough. A lot. He dropped Billy's hand, coughing into his own fist.

Billy watched him almost worriedly through the jag, one hand reaching out and grasping an elbow to steady him, pulling him in closer.

Steve leaned against the counter beside Billy after it passed, weakly wiping at his eyes. A cool hand landed on his forehead, startling him. He looked on as Billy ran his hand down his face, over his jaw, around the back of his sweaty neck.

"Jesus, Harrington, you're burning up. You should be at home," he practically accused. Then he paused, face slackening in...relief? "You stayed home sick today."

"Yeah, dipshit. I'm just here for some medicine," Steve answered, rolling his eyes and swatting the hand away. "But then somebody had to be a dumbass and get his ass handed to him in public."

Billy ignored him, standing up and pulling Steve up straight with him

by the arms. He looked him dead in the eye.

“Get some medicine, some cough drops and water and whatever other shit you need, and get home, pretty boy. You shouldn’t be out if you’re that sick. Go home and rest,” Billy said with a low, serious voice.

Steve was surprised at his tone. It came out almost like a command. He looked at Billy, at a loss for words.

What the fuck? Jesus, he was too tired for this shit.

He just nodded, deciding he was done with this bullshit for tonight. He slipped out of Billy’s hands and gathered the first aid kit before exiting the bathroom without looking back.

Steve sat on his couch later that night, burrowing back into his blankets and contemplating Billy.

What the hell was up with him? First, he gets all creepy with Steve in Mrs. Wheeler’s kitchen. Then he gets all pinch-y at the roller skating rink. And today Steve finds him fighting with a stranger in public. He was acting erratically, bouncing from one behavior to the next with hardly any constant for Steve to hold onto. And what the hell had been up with his own reaction to the fight? He’d felt worried over Billy. Distressed to see him fighting, sick to see him hurt.

Fuck. It’s almost like he cared about Billy. And then Billy had to go and get all intense about Steve being out and about while he was sick! God, the way he’d looked at him in the bathroom – his piercing eyes, his low voice. Even now, it made his stomach flip and his breathing speed up.

He thought briefly of Dustin asking him if he could feel that way for another guy. At this point, it didn’t seem too outside the realm of possibilities. But, hell, if he was going to start feeling things for other guys, he was not going to start with Billy Hargrove. He wasn’t. There was a perfectly good secret admirer waiting for his approval. A secret admirer that didn’t bring any of the bullshit caring about Billy would bring. Or so he hoped.

He sat in his blanket burrito, imagining going on a date with another guy. Sitting at the local diner, sharing a milkshake. Seeing a movie together, except they couldn't cuddle. Secretly holding hands, but the other hand is just as broad or broader. Kissing.

Kissing? Kissing a guy? Feeling Billy's stubble instead of Nancy's smooth cheek, hard muscles instead of soft curves?

He shivered, pulling the blanket over his head and groaning.

Steve stayed home the next day as well, feeling marginally better with the medicine but still not up to dealing with school and everything that would come with it.

Well, at least he had plenty of time to contemplate his answer to his secret admirer. He couldn't put it off any longer. He felt a bit like Dustin, making a pro and con table and listing out his different options.

Jesus, how much effort should this take?

He thought about what the younger boy had said, about if he cared and how he didn't actually have to give an answer. The thing was, he did want to give an answer. And right now, when he didn't actually have to interact with another guy beyond receiving notes, he wanted to react positively. But he also didn't want to lead anyone on, so he had to think beyond the notes.

He remembered that very first note, so unsure and hurting. Jesus, how could he say no to someone like that?

Steve determinedly strode into school Wednesday morning with all the confidence he could muster. He was still slightly congested, but he was well enough and his thoughts were making him crazy enough that he actually wanted to go to school.

He walked down the hallway toward his locker, where he could see the back of Billy's head hunched into his own locker.

"Morning!" he said brightly, then wondered why he had said it. Jesus, thinking about Billy the last few days really screwed with his head, apparently.

He opened the metal door of his locker and shoved his puffy jacket inside. Unsurprisingly, there was no note waiting for him. He knew there wouldn't be, but his stomach still sank slightly, knowing that his secret admirer hadn't sent him anything in the last two days while he was absent. A small voice in the back of his mind wondered if he'd screwed it all up already.

Next to him Billy froze, turning slowly from his own locker to take in Steve. His eyes were bloodshot, from too little sleep or too many cigarettes, Steve thought. His face was still bruised, the cuts closing up but the shiner near his eye a bright purple. It made Steve ache a little to see him in such a state, especially without his cocky expression. Billy briefly glanced down at Steve's ugly sweater before scowling and turning away, slamming his locker door and stomping off without a word.

O...kay. What the fuck? Had his Christmas sweater offended the other boy?

Steve glanced down at it. It was mostly gray with a series of smaller green Christmas trees across the chest, each with a disproportionately large yellow star at the top. It was pretty ugly, but Steve was rather proud of the meaning behind it. He'd thought the colors conveyed his feelings pretty well. Not too overly green, since he's still a little unsure about receiving letters from a guy, but enough to mean he's willing to try. And a lot of yellow because he really does enjoy the letters in the first place.

He sighed, wondering if his secret admirer would understand.

The day passed by relatively slowly without Billy's constant picking and prodding. The lack of interaction drove him insane. It was strange, almost like the other boy was ignoring him. The thought sat like a brick in his stomach, the reason why not something he was willing to contemplate. Was he embarrassed that Steve had seen him in such a vulnerable moment? That he'd helped clean him up?

He'd caught Billy looking at him several times throughout the day with a contemplative gaze, but each time he'd turn away quickly at being caught. The boy ran so hot and cold, it practically gave Steve whiplash.

Steve found himself more and more irritated as the day dragged on.

He snagged the seat directly behind Billy the last class of the day, for some reason determined to get the other boy to acknowledge him. However, despite rhythmically kicking his chair and occasionally prodding him with the chewed up pen he'd once been lent, Billy stayed docile and unmoved.

He was bent over his notebook, writing and writing, filling up page after page. Occasionally, Steve would see his arm jerk as he vigorously erased or scratched something out. Steve wondered what he could possibly be writing...it's not like the class required that much devotion to notes. He watched dejectedly as the final bell rang and Billy shot out of the room.

What an asshole. Fine, Steve had other things to think about, anyways.

Steve made his way to his locker, heart in his throat. Opening it, a single piece of folded up notebook paper sat inside. Reaching out with trembling fingers, he fished it out. On it was written a single line.

Hey Sunshine, hope you're feeling better.

That's it?! That...what the fuck is that?! He'd felt like he'd bared his own soul, wearing the stupid sweater with happy green Christmas trees on it, only to be rejected. What the fuck?!

Steve was shocked. He felt like he'd been slapped in the face. His eyes burned as he made his way to his car.

Ok, it's really not that bad. He got a note, so that's good. It might not have been one of the long, romantic ones he was used to, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Maybe he was surprised to see him after two days. Maybe he was caught off guard. And hey, the note did wish him well. Hell, maybe his sweater had been too ambiguous. Steve wondered for the second time that day if he'd screwed up his chances.

Steve thought this is why he needed Dustin to help him. He just felt

so dumb sometimes, and the younger boy was good at helping him think through things.

Fuck. Dammit. Fuck. Fine, if that's how he wants to play it.

Steve sat in his car, a low fire burning in his stomach with a renewed sense of determination to prove himself the next day.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

Omg, I've gotten so many wonderful comments on here and on Tumblr. I'm just blown away. They really help inspire me to keep going, and sometimes ya'll give me ideas too! Thanks to my beta @jgoose13 for listening to me complain. As always, I'm on tumblr @fullofwander.

Steve...was going insane.

He was pissed, he was confused, he was anxious...he was tired of being on a yo-yo string of emotions. Seriously, how could anyone live like that? He missed the days of stability, when he knew where he stood with himself and his peers. Where the only thing he had to worry about was remembering who the cool kids were paying attention to that week. When he knew he loved Nancy.

And now here he was, confused about Billy, angry about his secret admirer, on the outs with the cool kids, worried about the Party, worried about the upside-down, worried about college...it was never-ending.

He wanted to scream. Or punch something. Or swing his inherited nail-bat over and over into something.

He picked up his pillow and swung it over his head, coming down as hard as he could on the pile of green items on his bed. He'd scoured his closet, pulling out every piece of green clothing and accessory he owned, half tempted to wear all of it at once. He repeated the motion again, and again.

Still not satisfied, he scowled as he scooped up a single lime green sweater and pulled it on.

“Well don’t you just look like a little dark raincloud,” Dustin quipped as he climbed into the Beemer that morning. He paused midway through clicking his seatbelt, eyeing Steve’s sweater peeking through his jacket. “Okay, make that a bright green little raincloud.”

Steve scowled.

“So, I guess that means you made a decision?” he continued. “Wait, didn’t you go to school yesterday?”

“Yeah,” Steve muttered.

“...And?” Dustin asked, adjusting the hat over his curls. “What did you wear?” His tone was light with honest curiosity.

“A grey sweater with small green Christmas trees on it,” Steve said, sighing as he fluffed up his hair with one hand. “I got another note, but it was only one line. ‘Hope you’re feeling better.’”

“Hm, maybe you confused him. Or maybe he was upset that you didn’t jump all in, feet first, like you’re apparently doing today,” Dustin said slyly, motioning to his own chest. “You are feeling better though, right? At least there’s that!”

Steve turned to look at him, incredulous. But Dustin’s happy face beamed back at him from the passenger’s seat, his new toothy smile happy and bright, and Steve deflated.

The rest of the car ride was spent in relative silence, both contemplating Steve’s secret admirer as they pulled into the school parking lot. Billy almost immediately pulled into the space across from them. The two watched as he and Max silently climbed out of the car and went their separate ways. The healing bruises on Billy’s face took on a garish look in the morning sun, purple and green and yellow bright against his skin.

Steve’s hands clenched down on the steering wheel as he watched the other boy walk away.

“Max says Billy’s dad is an asshole. Says he’s not very...gentle with him,” Dustin said suddenly, in a low, contemplative voice, eyes trained on Billy’s muscular back. “Max says he went home and picked

a fight with his old man after school on Monday.”

“Huh? Why would he do that?” Steve said, confused and uncomfortable, and turned to look at Dustin. Dustin had a surprisingly somber look on his face.

“I don’t know, man. That’s just what she said,” he said, looking uncomfortable himself now, and reaching for the door handle.

Steve sat there for a moment, contemplating what he’d said. Billy picked a fight with his dad on Monday. His dad, who apparently wasn’t very “gentle” with him. Then Monday night, Steve sees Billy in another fight, and afterwards he says that someone else had messed up his face. Steve sighed, not liking where this was going.

He followed Dustin out of the car, waving to the younger boy with a strained smile before making his way toward the high school.

Billy was at their lockers when Steve walked up. Steve studiously ignored him this time, not sure how to interact with him at the moment. They stood silently side-by-side, awkwardly shuffling through their morning routine.

At least, it felt awkward to Steve. That feeling multiplied twofold when a female classmate came up and tapped Billy on the shoulder. Sherry, Steve thought her name was.

“Hi Billy! I just wanted to make sure you were coming to my party tomorrow night!” she said, stepping slightly between the two boys handing Billy a brightly-colored pamphlet from the stack in her hand. Her eyes were big in her hopeful face.

Billy looked down at her, his face morphing into the wide, smarmy grin Steve had seen him give Mrs. Wheeler more than once.

“I never say no when a beautiful girl invites me over to her house,” he said, propping one arm up on the metal lockers, winking at her. Sherry giggled, flipping a ringlet over her shoulder.

Steve rolled his eyes, taking his jacket off and stuffed it into his locker as the other two ignored him. He tugged at the hem of his bright green sweater, suddenly self-conscious. To the side, he heard a

metallic clang. He looked over just in time to see Billy righting himself after apparently slipping and knocking into his locker door. Their eyes met briefly, Steve wondering what the new glint in Billy's meant. If Steve didn't know any better, he'd say it was an almost hungry look. Idly his eyes ran over the bruises still on his face, thinking briefly of what Dustin said earlier.

Billy turned back to Sherry, smiling wider. Sherry stuttered, noticeably flustered, when Billy ran a hand down her arm. She briefly reached out a hand and touched his bare chest where his shirt was obscenely unbuttoned despite the cold.

What a fucking sleazy asshole. But even Billy didn't deserve to be smacked around by his own father. No one did.

Steve turned, stomping off to his first class.

Later that day, Nancy sat down next to him at the lunch table with one of the party flyers.

"It's a Christmas party," she said. "I think I'm going to drag Jonathan to it. Are you going?"

"What, to watch you and Jonathan get all snuggly while I'm all by myself? Yeah, no thanks," Steve said, still in a bad mood. Nancy looked at him with wide, sad eyes. "C'mon, don't look at me like that. Besides, drinking bad mixed drinks and shit beer just doesn't have the same appeal it used to have. I thought you'd be proud of me, personal growth and all. I finally understand where you were coming from."

"See?" Jonathan said as he sat down across from them. "Just because there'll be eggnog and mistletoe doesn't mean we have to go. It's still just going to be the same drunk assholes that go to all these parties. Nice sweater by the way, Steve."

Steve flipped him off.

Across the lunchroom, he spotted Billy as he got up and threw something away. Billy paused by the trash cans, as if feeling eyes on him. He glanced over his shoulder and locked eyes with Steve, giving him a slow feral grin and a wink before sauntering out the door.

Steve got up, murmuring something to the others, and followed Billy out of the cafeteria.

“Hey asshole!” he shouted in the hallway at the other boy’s jean-covered back. Billy froze for a moment before turning and watching Steve approach him. The grin stretching across his face settled into something more sincere as he looked Steve up and down. Steve stopped in front of him, shifting on his feet in hesitation.

“Yeah?” Billy drawled after a moment.

“You never told me who bruised your face up,” Steve said, rubbing his nose and looking away.

Now it was Billy’s turn to look cagey. “Look, Harrington, it doesn’t matter. It’s done. Drop it,” he said, putting his hands on his hips. Steve looked him in the eyes.

Don’t do it. Don’t do it. It’s not your place.

“Was it your dad?” Steve blurted out. Fuck.

Billy was suddenly in his face, pushing him back into the wall. No, not the wall, a door. The bathroom door. The two stumbled through it, Billy kicking it shut behind him.

“Don’t,” he snapped. He stuck his finger in Steve’s face. “I don’t know what the fuck you think you know, but you need to keep your mouth shut.”

“I just—I just want to help,” Steve said, voice tight, eyes hot.

Billy walked toward him, finger still in his chest, backing him up against the sink. “What happens in my home is my business, Harrington, not yours,” Billy said, eyes looking a little wild.

“Why would you—how could you—” Steve tried to articulate. “Shit

Billy, you should tell someone!”

“Tell someone? Like who? A teacher? A police officer? You?” Billy sneered. “So my Dad gets a little slap happy sometimes. So what? In a few months I’ll be eighteen and it won’t matter anymore. I can live like this until then.”

“But—” Steve started.

“But nothing!” he roared, bringing his hands down in a hard slap on either side of Steve, leaning into him. “You don’t go near this,” he said in a low dangerous tone. “Or I’ll make sure you don’t.”

Steve swallowed hard. “You’ve tried that intimidation shit before. I’m not afraid of you,” he said in a low voice. He reached out a hand and gently touched the bruises on the side of Billy’s face. They were smaller than they had been on Monday. “Even when you were beating the shit out of me, I wasn’t afraid of you. Just of what might happen.”

“Maybe you should be. Maybe you should be afraid of the person I could become,” Billy murmured, voice going so low it was barely a whisper. He allowed Steve to keep his palm against his face – almost seemed to lean into it.

“People change,” Steve said, smoothing his hand down Billy’s face and neck to rest it over his pounding heart. “Who do you want to be?”

Steve watched Billy’s Adam’s apple bob, the motion seemingly painful. He had a hard time meeting his eyes. It made him feel too vulnerable, like something could change, was changing, between them. Underneath his palm, Billy’s chest was warm and firm, noticeably moving up and down as he took great big breaths. Billy didn’t answer his question. He seemed to be thinking, weighing his options. Steve waited, though he wasn’t sure for what.

After an eternity Billy finally leaned up, face rearranging into a more neutral expression. Steve’s hand remained over his heart.

“Is this our thing now, meeting in bathrooms? People will talk,” he

said in a lighter almost teasing, tone. Steve took it for the subject change it was. His shoulders loosened, and he could feel his knees wobble from adrenaline.

“Fuck you,” Steve shot back, not sure how to respond.

“You offering?” Billy asked with a glint in his eye, reaching down to grip the hand still on his chest. His other hand landed on Steve’s hip, yanking him forward. Steve stumbled, caught off-guard. “You going to the party tomorrow night, pretty boy?”

“What?” Steve asked, having a hard time keeping up with Billy. “I mean, uh, probably not. It’s not really my scene anymore.”

“You should,” Billy said.

Loud laughter outside in the hallway broke into their little bubble. Steve jerked away from Billy, turning to the sink and moving to wash his hands just as the bathroom door swung open. Billy watched him in the mirror as another boy entered and went about his business. Steve saw Billy’s eyes track down his back before he gave him a predatory grin. Then he turned and left the bathroom.

Steve waited a few moments, soaping his hands to wash and then drying them thoroughly, before exiting the bathroom himself. He checked the hallway, not sure what he was looking for, not sure what he was hoping to see.

Billy was already gone.

The rest of the school day was torture after the intense interaction with Billy. On the one hand, Steve felt he had a much better understanding of the other boy. On the other, he felt even more lost about where the two stood with each other. Were they still enemies? Were they becoming friends? Were they something else entirely? The feel of Billy’s hand on his hip followed him like a brand. He’d been so unready in the moment to understand what was happening or how he felt about it. Afterward, though, he could admit that having the other

boy's hands on him was heady. He thought back to Monday night, when he'd been sick and Billy had touched his face with such gentleness and care. Jesus, why was this so confusing?

Billy continued to give him twinkling-eyed wide grins anytime he saw him.

By the end of the day his dark mood had dissipated, leaving him feeling emotionally drained. Again. Fuck. However, that didn't stop his heart from jumping into his throat when he opened his locker at the end of the day and saw another note, this one seemingly thicker than the last one. He opened it, surprised when a small manila envelope tumbled out of the folds and fluttered to the ground. He bent down and scooped it up, then dumped the contents in his hand. It was a dried pressed sunflower, its bright petals arranged in a halo around its center. Steve stared at it, stunned. It was beautiful. He held it carefully, not sure how delicate it was. He gently slid it back into the envelope and set it back in his locker, then turned to the note.

Hey Sunshine,

You looked stunning today. Not just because of you wearing green for me, but I think it helped. The flower made me think of you. Not a very manly hobby to have, flower pressing. But it's something I used to do with my Mom before she died. Now I do it to feel close to her. You're the first person I've shared one with. Fuck, I keep spilling my secrets to you. What power do you have over me that makes me do that? Stupid question – I know what it is. It's your kindness. The genuine care I see you try to hide behind the cool guy exterior. I hope you like the flower. You deserve to be given gifts, to have someone show you you're special to them. Are you going to that big party tomorrow night? I am. I hope you'll be there, even if we won't be there together. I wish I could take you to it. I wish I could hold your hand, wrap my arm around your waist in front of all those people and show them you were mine. I want to pull you close while music pounds through the speakers, fit our hips together and rock to the beat. Run my hands under your shirt, up your naked back. Feel the sweat drip

down your neck when the room gets too hot from too many people. Push you up against a wall in a dark corner and devour you. Sneak my hand down your pants. It would be dark enough, I'm sure no one would see. I want to see your face when I touch you like that, intimately, to give you pleasure. Would you moan? Would you blush? Would you be shy or wanton? I'll be happy to see you there, tomorrow night, even if I can't have you. Although, the thought of seeing you dance with someone else, of seeing you kiss them, makes me burn with furious jealousy. I know I don't have the right, but it still sits in my stomach. Fuck, it'll be so hard to keep myself from coming up to you, from ripping you away from them. I can only imagine the look in your eyes if I did. God, I wish I could ask you to wear something sexy for me. I promise, though, to be on my best behavior. If you come to the party. If you don't, know that I'll be thinking of you, fantasizing about you, the whole time.

Your Secret Admirer

Fuck. Fuck, that note was everything he'd wished the note from the day before was. God, the way this guy wrote was intoxicating. He made Steve feel wanted and desirable. He'd spent so many years feeling insecure in who he was and where he stood, but with a few sentences from this nameless guy he felt like he was truly seen and understood.

And whoever he was, he cared enough and trusted Steve enough to share personal information about his mother. That made the flower even more precious to Steve. He wanted to be the kind of guy who was worthy of that kind of trust. He felt like he'd failed Nancy in that, multiple times, and he didn't want to be that guy again. He vowed to himself that he would take it home and preserve it as well as he was able. Which begs the question – how do you store dried, pressed flowers? Maybe he'll send Dustin down that “curiosity voyage,” as he would say.

Then there was this fucking party that everyone, including his secret admirer, was talking about. Should he go? Did he want to deal with all those drunk assholes? The last time he'd gone to a party like that,

he'd been given a rude awakening. Did he really want to go to another one? So far, his ex-girlfriend will be there, along with her new boyfriend, Billy (whatever he was to Steve), and his secret admirer. Fuck.

He carefully picked the small manila envelope out of his locker and made his way out to his car.

7. An Interlude

Notes for the Chapter:

So this chapter is short! Because it's a brief interlude!
Hahaha! Thanks to my beta @jgoose13. As always,
I'm on tumblr @fullofwander.

Dustin rushed outside as soon as school was over Friday afternoon, counting on Lucas and Max spending a few minutes being grossly cute with each other before Max made her way to her step-brother. He glanced at the high school, making sure he didn't see Steve yet. Dustin had a hunch, a theory, a gut feeling backed by several pieces of data that he wanted to confirm.

The latest bit of evidence had only come the afternoon before, but it had been enough of a sign for Dustin to feel he had to do something. Hell, he was never one for sitting and waiting for things to happen, anyway.

"So, how's Billy been since you almost smashed his balls in?" Dustin had asked Max Thursday afternoon as they sipped drinks and waited for their turns at the arcade.

"I don't know, he's been alright," Max had said, shrugging. Her attention was caught by Lucas, who was attempting to beat her high score. "Less of an asshole, I guess. He mostly ignores me."

"Has he been acting strange at all? Cagey? Like he's hiding something?" Dustin had prodded. Sure, he was fishing, but it was for a good cause. She turned to face him fully, raising her eyebrows.

"What? I don't know, I try to ignore him too," she had answered back. She tilted her head, her gaze going distant for a moment. "He has been acting a little weird, though. I think he might have a secret girlfriend or something." She wrinkled her nose.

“Oh?” Dustin had murmured, perking up.

“Yeah. He left his composition notebook out a few days ago, and I accidentally picked it up thinking it was mine,” She had said, glanced around. She lowered her voice. “It was filled with all these notes, like page after page of gross lovey dovey crap. Some of it was...really descriptive. Like, all these things he wanted to do with her. Kissing and touching and stuff. I closed it real fast and put it back where I found it.”

“Huh, yeah, weird,” Dustin had said, his mind whirling.

It still could have been a coincidence, but if life had taught Dustin anything recently, it's that coincidences were rarely just that.

He turned toward the parking lot, quickly making his way over to Billy Hargrove.

Billy was leaning up against the back of his car, face blank as he stared at the high school. Dustin watched him bring a cigarette to his mouth, inhaling deeply before slowly puffing smoke out into the cold afternoon air. Dustin wrinkled his nose, not excited to approach the older boy and deal with his bullshit.

But he had to. For Steve.

He just hoped that being in the school parking lot with other people around them would keep Billy from reacting too badly.

“Hey,” he said, coming up next to Billy. Billy slowly turned his head toward him, raising his eyebrows in incredulity. He stared at Dustin, silent.

Shit, Dustin hoped he wasn't making a mistake.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” Dustin started, clutching the backpack straps over both his shoulders.

Billy took another long drag while looking Dustin up and down with a blank expression. “Do I know you?” he asked, smoke leaking from his lips and nose as he spoke.

“I’m a friend of Max’s,” Dustin said.

“Yeah, I don’t care,” Billy said, turning away again.

“You’re Steve’s secret admirer, aren’t you?” Dustin blurted out.

Billy froze, muscles tensing. Dustin actually felt like he saw the older boy firm up into a statue. Billy slowly turned his head back toward Dustin, the motion looking painful. Tendons popped out on his neck and a fire lit in his eyes, one Dustin hadn’t seen since the night he kicked the shit out of Steve at the Byers’ house.

Oh shit, he was in for it now.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?” Billy said through a scary smile.

Dustin swallowed and tried not to take a step back.

“Steve showed me the notes. I’ve been talking about it with him from the beginning. I promised to help him figure out who it is. I think it’s you,” Dustin said in a rush. He had to get it all out, before Billy decided he was done listening. “It makes sense. I watch your reaction to Steve when we arrive in the mornings. I saw the way you looked at him when he wore yellow. I helped him figure out if he wanted to wear green.”

Dustin could feel his heartbeat in his ears, but he steeled himself. He’d faced down scarier things than an angry teenager. And this was for Steve.

Billy slowly stood up straight, coming face to face with Dustin. He was breathing hard, his hands clenching and unclenching, and Dustin thought he understood the fire in Billy’s eyes now—desperation.

“And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Billy asked, voice low and rough.

“I want to help you, asshole!” Dustin snapped.

The admission made Billy stop short. Dustin took a deep breath, adjusting the hat on his head.

“Look, those notes really mean something to Steve. Sure, he was a little freaked out when it was confirmed that a guy was writing them, but he’s coming around. I think they’re good for him. It’s been a long time since anyone bothered to get to know the real Steve, and I can say from personal experience that he’s a really great guy once you get past the bullshit. I want him to be happy,” Dustin said, innocent honesty leaking into his voice.

“And you think he could be happy with me?” Billy asked, blue eyes wide, voice still angry but with a fragile note that he would never admit to. His cigarette dangled from limp fingers, forgotten. Dustin studied him, weighing his own response.

“Yeah, I do. It’s not just the notes. I saw the way he was looking at you in Mrs. Wheeler’s kitchen. And at the skating rink? He doesn’t look at just anyone with that kind of focus,” Dustin said, thinking out loud. “You challenge him, bring out a fire in him or some shit I haven’t seen before.”

The two stood there glaring at each other. Dustin idly wondered if Billy was at a loss for words.

“Look, I don’t want to just blurt out to Steve that it’s you. I think he should figure this shit out himself. Or that you should actually tell him,” Dustin continued, giving Billy a sideways eye. “But like I said, I do want to help. So I think you should let me help you put notes in other places besides his locker or something. Or I could help give you an insider’s perspective on what he’s feeling. At this rate, I figure that if you’re just as much of a dipshit as Steve is, you could both use all the help you can get.”

Throughout his rant, Billy’s eyebrows inched higher and higher up his forehead. The look he was giving Dustin was almost comical. But at least it wasn’t scary angry anymore.

“What’s your name, nerd?” Billy asked, finally dropping the stub of

his cigarette and crushing it beneath a boot.

“Dustin. Henderson. Here’s my phone number,” he said, pulling out a spare bit of notebook paper from his pocket and scribbling it down. He held it out to Billy with a happy grin.

Billy reached past it and grabbed his wrist, hauling him in close.

“You don’t repeat a word of this to anyone. Not Steve, not Max. No one,” he growled in Dustin’s face. Dustin nodded quickly. Billy let go and plucked the paper from his hand, pocketing it quickly before pulling out another cigarette. “You’d better go, nerd. Steve just walked out.”

Dustin turned, spotting Steve near the doors of the high school, before facing Billy again.

“By the way, dude, that whole pressed flower thing? Brilliant,” he said, giving Billy two thumbs up and a wide smile as he took a few steps backwards. He laughed at the disbelieving look on Billy’s face before turning and jogging toward Steve’s car, aware that Billy had never actually outright admitted to writing the notes.

Steve unlocked the car doors, climbing in while giving Billy an intense look across the parking lot. When they were seated, he turned to Dustin.

“What the hell was that about?” he asked, concern clear in his voice and on his face.

“What? Nothing. I just had a question about Max. I’m still working on Christmas presents, you know?” Dustin answered vaguely. “So, did you get another note today?”

Steve looked at him suspiciously, his doe brown eyes large in his face. “Yeah.”

He started up the car and pulled out of the lot, eyes on Billy as he watched them leave.

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

Omg, the reaction to chapter 7 was amazing. So many people commented on Dustin the love guru. It's gonna be awesome. As always, thanks to my beta @jgoose13 for listening to me bitch every 200 words! I'm on Tumblr @fullofwander.

Steve climbed out of his car at the party, looking around at all the other cars parked on the street and wondering if he shouldn't have tried to get a ride from Jonathan. He doubted the other boy would be drinking tonight.

He tugged at the bottom of his crop top sweatshirt jersey, not used to the high hemline. Several inches of his entire middle was showing, giving everyone a view of his lithe and toned stomach. He wasn't sure that another guy would find it sexy, but it was fitted to his arms and showed off the breadth of his shoulders and the taper of his waist. He hadn't worn the damn thing in a year and a half, at least. Now here he was like some dumbass trying to impress another guy with his abs. Fuck. Fuck.

Steve made his way into the house. Christmas lights lined the roof and windows, and loud music leaked through the cracks. He opened the front door to a wall of bodies, and a blast of hot, stale air followed the music out—the product of too many people in too small a space. And it already reeked of alcohol and cigarette smoke.

Steve found Nancy and Jonathan inside, somehow having gotten a love seat at the edge of the living room turned dance floor. Steve made his way to them, beer in one hand and elbowing people aside with the other, and squeezed down next to them on the small sofa. There wasn't really enough room for all three teenagers, but Steve was feeling awkward enough that he didn't want to be standing alone. At least sitting down helped him hide his stomach a bit.

He quickly came to regret that decision, though, as Nancy and Jonathan spent the next 10 minutes talking into each other's ears and

giggling and occasionally kissing. The music was loud enough that normal conversation was almost impossible. Steve sat there staring at the people around him. He took a long swallow from his can, tilting it up to get the already-warm dregs.

A cloud of cigarette smoke and cologne enveloped him before a hand held a beer in front of his face. Surprised, he followed the arm up to see Billy standing beside him with a wolf grin and a bare chest, necklace and earring glinting in the low light.

“Thanks,” Steve yelled over the music, taking the unopened can and pressing his empty one into Billy’s palm with a grin. Surprisingly, Billy took it, setting it down on a shelf above Steve’s head. Steve opened the new can as he watched Billy pull a pack of cigarettes from somewhere and stick one in his mouth to light. Steve motioned to it, taking it when Billy held it out. Billy just grinned wider, lighting a second cigarette.

“Didn’t know you smoked, Harrington,” Billy said loudly, placing a hand on the wall and leaning down to talk to him.

Steve used the lit cigarette to gesture to the two teens sitting next to him, inhaling a large drag before slowly letting it out. It did help. He shouted back, “I need it tonight.”

Billy’s necklace pendant swung above Steve, mesmerizing in the hazy, low light. Beside him, Nancy turned to look up at Billy, obviously surprised to see him hovering.

“Ah,” Billy said knowingly. He turned to Nancy. Raising his voice more, he said, “Still slumming it with the Byers weirdo?”

Nancy blinked at him, her mouth dropping open a bit, and Steve wondered how much she had already had to drink.

“What the hell is your problem, asshole?” she finally shouted back.

“See,” he paused to take a drag of his cigarette before continued, “what I don’t understand is, you’ve got this great guy who’s willing to bend over backwards for you, and you dump him to hang all over this piece of shit.” He gestured to Jonathan. “Harrington, didn’t you

change for her? Give up some of your friends or something? Try to fit into her version of the perfect guy?"

"Hey, dick, you can call me names all you like, but none of this was Nancy's fault!" Jonathan shouted, starting to stand up. Nancy caught his arm.

"Yeah, and that's not exactly how it happened. How do you even know that?" Steve asked, looking up at Billy with wide eyes.

"People like to talk in this town. You know what else I heard? I heard the freak likes taking pictures of girls through bedroom windows," he said with a vicious grin.

Jonathan lunged across the couch, nearly catching Billy by his open shirt but landing hard in Nancy's lap instead.

"OK!" Steve shouted, jumping up and slapping a hand on Billy's chest, his other hand balancing the can and cigarette. Billy looked down at his exposed midriff, pausing before raking his eyes back up. He gave Steve a hungry grin. Behind Steve, Nancy and Jonathan were arguing without arguing about the merits of fighting at a houseparty. Steve took another puff of his cigarette, trying to calm his suddenly pounding heart.

"Why are you even sitting with them? C'mon, Harrington, let's dance!" Billy shouted, grabbing the hand on his chest and attempting to drag Steve closer to the grinding mass of teenagers.

"Those are still my friends, asshole, and I don't really appreciate you talking to them like that!" Steve yelled into Billy's ear. He pushed him away.

Billy gave him an exaggerated leer as he took a few steps backward, licking his lips and winking lavishly.

Steve brought the beer can to his lips and drank, then turned and walked away.

Steve was drunk. Not crazy blackout drunk, but past tipsy and well on his way to getting philosophical. His cigarette was long gone, and he'd set his latest empty beer can...somewhere. He'd spent the last hour or so wandering around the house, avoiding Billy and unwilling to force himself onto Jonathan and Nancy. The last thing he needed was her asking what was up with Billy almost defending him, again. That left little else for him to do except drink and think. And he was tired of thinking.

He'd thought of Nancy, and how ridiculously well-suited she and Jonathan were. He thought of Billy, his scolding eyes and hands. And he thought of his secret admirer, supposedly here somewhere. It made his heart hurt with longing, not necessarily for his secret admirer himself, but for what he could stand for, what he could provide.

Steve wondered if his secret admirer had seen him with Billy. He wondered if he'd gotten jealous. He ran a hand over his exposed stomach and wondered what he thought of Steve's physique.

Fuck, he really was drunk.

He also wondered how his secret admirer could see so much of him, yet Steve couldn't pick him out of the crowd currently in Sherry's house. Nancy always did say he was blind sometimes, but her little smile and shake of her head always made it seem funny. It didn't feel funny now.

He sighed, slumped in the hallway where it was darker but less crowded, people not lingering as they made their way from one room to another.

Fuck, this was the party that would not end. Were they always like this? Steve couldn't remember. Looking back on it, Steve thought it was crazy that someone could have that much of an impact on him. But it was clear for him to see, a marked difference in what he did and how he acted, delineated by dating Nancy. He wasn't sure he liked someone else having that kind of power over him. He wondered if someone soon would have that kind of power over him again. Wondered if someone already did. He looked down at himself and ran a hand across his bare stomach. Guess that answers that.

“Steve!” A girl shouted, grabbing his elbow and swinging around in front of him. He smiled, recognizing her but not knowing her name. “Hi!”

“Hey,” he shouted back. She giggled and almost fell over, the red solo cup in her hand sloshing liquid over the sides. He steadied her with a hand on her waist, and she laughed harder.

“Come here!” she whisper-yelled, wiggling a finger towards herself. “I have a secret to tell you!”

Amused, he bent down toward her. Quick as a flash, she wrapped her free hand around his neck and kissed him. It was sloppy, and wet, and tasted like candy-alcohol. But it was also kind of nice, especially after his recent mopey thoughts. He let the kiss continue, drunk enough himself to not mind feeling her tongue brush his lower lip.

Sometimes, it’s just nice to be kissed.

The mystery girl broke the kiss, giggling again as she laid her head on Steve’s shoulder. She pulled back to look at him, her eyes landing on something over her shoulder. Suddenly the color drained from her face.

“Uh, bye Steve!” she shouted, before stumbling off quicker than she’d stumbled into his arms.

Puzzled, Steve turns to see what startled her.

It was Billy. Of course. He was standing near the other end of the hallway, teeth bared in a snarl, glaring at Steve from under heavy lids. He took slow, heavy steps toward him, beer can crinkling in one hand.

“Who the fuck was that?” he growled, getting up in his face. Steve could smell the alcohol on his breath.

“I...I’m not sure,” he answered, surprised at the almost furious look on Billy’s face and too drunk to divine the meaning behind it. “But why’d you scare her off? It was kind of nice.”

Billy looked like he’d been slapped, before his lips quirked up into a

mean smirk. Steve was still staring, unsure of what was happening but knowing that he didn't like it. He hadn't seen that particular brand of nasty on Billy's face in a while.

"Oh, so you like making out with nameless bitches now, huh? Wow, Harrington, I never took you for a slut," he said with a crazy-eyed grin.

"What's your problem, man?" Steve asked, starting to get angry himself. He grabbed a handful of his own hair, pulling in frustration. "Jesus, for one night I'd like to not feel so alone, and you have to go and ruin it. She wasn't the important part. It was just nice to have someone want to kiss me. Someone real and in front of me and who I could touch right now. Not just someone from a note who sometimes just feels like a figment of my imagination!"

Steve clicked his teeth together, embarrassed that he'd let his mouth run away from him. Billy's face had gone blank through his outburst, and now he stood looking at Steve with wide, bottomless eyes. His eyes dragged down to Steve's lips, and he swallowed hard.

Steve couldn't handle this right now. He couldn't.

Abruptly, he turned toward the living room.

"Where are you going?" Billy shouted at his back.

"I'm going to dance!" he answered over his shoulder. He could feel Billy's gaze on him, raking down his spine and across his exposed lower back. God, or maybe that was just his imagination.

The living room had gotten even more crowded, music pounding over the crush of bodies. Steve couldn't hardly push through, and any small movement had a ripple effect seemingly capable of toppling the nearest handful of people. To Steve's alcohol-soaked mind, it was great. Here, he wasn't himself. He was just a speck in the larger organism that pulsed to the bass.

Some fast-paced rock song blasted through the room, almost too loud to recognize, guitars and drums and wailing lyrics. Steve slithered through the crowd until he was near the middle, bodies pushing from

all sides, humid and dark, and lets himself bob along. The heat went to his head, making him feel dizzy and drunker than he felt moments ago.

A girl slid in front of him, momentarily putting a hand on his chest, locking eyes with him as they connect through miming the lyrics together, before she turned back to her friends. To his left, a guy used his shoulder for balance as he jumped to the beat.

Behind him, a body pressed up against his back as two searing hands slid around his waist and land on his stomach. The smell of cigarettes and strong, familiar cologne enveloped him. Billy. The crushing crowd hid his hands as they travel up Steve's stomach, over his toned abs. He felt Billy's breath just behind him, brushing over his neck, and allowed himself to relax into the hold for the duration of the song. Steve thought he could almost feel the vibrations of Billy singing along against his ear. Fingernails raked down his sides, making him shiver, and the hands landed back on his hips to pull him into the teen behind him. Here, in the middle of this crowd, there was just a brief moment of anonymity. But it wouldn't last forever, and this was dangerous territory.

Steve turned in Billy's arms, determined to put some space between them before someone noticed. The action immediately felt like a mistake--now they were face to face, pressed close because of the crowd, Billy's overly-warm hands cradling the small of Steve's back. Their similar height meant Steve was looking straight into Billy's eyes, but he couldn't (or wouldn't) name what he saw. But the blown pupils and slightly glazed look did make him wonder exactly how drunk Billy was. Billy's cologne was even more potent this close, and Steve had the vaguest sensation of having smelt it recently from somewhere unexpected.

Billy shouted something over the music, but even standing this close Steve couldn't make it out. The look on his face must have shown that, as Billy leaned closer and placed his lips against Steve's ear.

"Smoke?" he shouted. Steve nodded.

Billy kept a hand high on his exposed waist as they made their way to the edge of the room. Billy pushed him toward the hallway,

directing him to the back door instead of the closer front door. Once they were out of the crush of people he dropped his hand, and Steve mourned the loss of heat.

They stepped outside, the cold air rushing to chase away the heat from the party. Steve shivered, crossing his arms over his exposed middle. The back yard had several pieces of decorative furniture, all decorated for the Christmas season. Steve made his way over to lean against a lattice arch, laced with twinkling lights and fir branches, Billy following behind.

Jesus, even from outside the house he could still clearly hear the music. It was a miracle somebody hadn't called the cops on the party yet.

"You're gonna freeze out here," Steve said, looking at Billy in his mostly unbuttoned shirt. Light flurries were beginning to dust them, but Billy seemed to steam in the cold air. He grinned, leaning against the opposite side of the arch. Steve shifted, waiting for Billy to pull out his smokes.

"What are we doing out here?" Steve finally asked, when Billy continued to do nothing but stare at him. He looked down at his exposed toned stomach. The cold air had sobered Steve up some, but he was still tipsy enough to be comfortable in Billy's presence, confident in being captured by his gaze.

"Needed some air," Billy murmured, before tilting his head back against the arch. He looked up and smiled, a short breathless laugh leaving him.

Steve followed his gaze up, eyes landing on the mistletoe pinned to the top of the arch. Of course. It seemed to be purposefully placed to be hidden until you were already under it.

He let out a long, slow breath and looked back at Billy, who was avoiding his gaze.

Steve, emboldened by everything that had happened that night, took a small step forward and rested a hand on Billy's cheek. Billy jerked to look at him in surprise, freezing as he leaned forward to innocently

kiss an almost healed cut on his brow, then the bruise still high on Billy's cheek bone. He felt a shuddering exhale against his own cheek, and couldn't stop himself from following it down to the corner of Billy's mouth.

It was just a light press of lips, and Steve held the kiss for what felt like an awkward amount of time.

Suddenly realizing what he was doing, his heart stopped for a moment, then beat double time in panic as he broke the kiss, moving to take a step back.

Billy immediately lunged at him, wrapping an arm around his waist and a hand in his hair, and devoured him. The kiss was hard, brutal, teeth clacking from the force of Billy's lunge. Steve was surprised to hear the other teen groan low in his throat. Teeth grazed his lower lip, Billy's tongue following in a frantic sweep. The kiss opened, and all Steve could concentrate on was heat and wet and Billy. He fisted a hand in the open collar of his shirt, pulling Billy forward as much as possible. The hand at his back scrabbled up under his crop top, letting in chilled air that brought him back to the present.

They're essentially in public. Kissing. His secret admirer was there, Nancy was there, a whole bunch of their classmates were there, any of who could have seen.

Steve pushed Billy away, wiping a hand across his mouth as he stumbled back a few steps and took large gulps of the cold air. Billy leaned a hand against the arch, panting and looking at Steve like an angry wildcat, fists clenching, mouth snarling.

"Sorry, I'm drunk. You're drunk. We're both drunk and we shouldn't have done that," Steve said, breathless.

Billy just continued to watch him, looking like he might pounce again at any moment, though whether to kiss him or tear him apart Steve wasn't sure.

At this point, was there a difference?

Not knowing what else to do, Steve turned and almost ran back to

the house. Fuck. It was time to beg Jonathan to get them the fuck out of there.

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

MERRY FUCKING CHRISTMAS EVERYBODY! Sorry this chapter took so long...I've been in a bit of a reyo haze the last week :P. CHECK OUT @patssu's AMAZING ARTWORK crop top steve <https://patssu.tumblr.com/post/168765698365/steve-in-fullofwanders-amazing-fic>. As always, a giant thank you to @jgoose13 for holding my hand through this entire chapter. I'm on tumblr @fullofwander.

Steve woke up Saturday morning with a mild hangover and the determination to never get out of bed again. Nope. And he was definitely never going back to school. He was just going to lay there, in abject horror at what had become of his life, and wait for the demodogs to take him.

He wasn't horrified at having kissed Billy. No, he was far from it. The memory of it, warmed around the edges from the alcohol, left him feeling shaky, breathless, wanting more. He was pretty sure he'd left Nancy feeling that way more than once when he'd kissed her, but this was different. This time, he was the one affected. The heat of Billy's mouth had been imprinted on his skin, and even now he craved it. And that scared him.

He pulled his blanket over his head and buried himself, unsuccessfully trying to shake the thoughts.

Holy shit, why had he done that? And why hadn't Billy kicked his ass? Shouldn't Billy have kicked his ass? It seemed like a very Billy thing to do. But he hadn't. Instead, he'd kissed him back. What the fuck?

Billy had proved himself to be a loose cannon over the last few months, fighting and flirting in equal measure. He hadn't been fighting with Steve recently, though. He hadn't really, truly fought with Steve since that night at the Byers'. Everything else since had been tame, almost innocent. Playful.

And now they'd kissed.

Butterflies churned sickly in Steve's stomach at the thought.

God, had Billy really been that desperate, or was that a misinterpretation of Steve's alcohol-addled mind? He remembered Billy's hands, like hot irons as they grabbed at Steve's exposed skin, his wild eyes consuming him. Billy was like a large wild cat, prowling but docile, and capable of attacking at a moment's notice.

Why had Billy kissed Steve back? It didn't make any sense.

Or did it?

Steve thought of Billy pinching him at the skating rink, feeling his forehead when he was sick, taking Steve's hand when he'd placed it over Billy's heart. Jesus, was all that real? Did it add up to something real?

He sighed, rolling over and kicking off his covers in agitation. Across the room, a pressed flower stared at him next to a pile of letters, and Steve's stomach clenched from another emotion.

Guilt. He felt guilty that he'd encouraged his secret admirer to continue writing to him, then only days later kissed someone else. Another boy, even.

Fuck. He loved getting those letters. He really did. But sometimes, when he thought about them in the middle of the night or when he watched Nancy wrap herself around Jonathan, they just made him feel lonelier. He wished he could reach out and touch the other person, his secret admirer. But he couldn't.

He could, however, touch Billy. Kissing him had given him something tangible to cling to.

The letters got to him emotionally; Billy got to him physically. If only he could merge the two.

Shit, now the sunflower was mocking him, and he felt even more like a cheating asshole.

The phone ringing startled him out of his thoughts, and he bodily rolled himself out of bed to answer it.

Steve found himself sitting across from Dustin in the local diner not too much later, the phone call having been Dustin's mom begging Steve to babysit last minute. While Steve would have liked to hide at home all weekend, or even at Dustin's, the pull of good greasy food and terrible coffee was too strong.

They took a booth, putting in large orders of waffles and scrambled eggs and fried bacon. Steve's mind wandered, even as he tried to push back his thoughts from that morning and focus on the present.

"So," Dustin started, drawing Steve's attention back to him, "what's up?"

Jesus, was the boy psychic or something?

"What do you mean?" Steve said, taking a sip of coffee just the right side of too sweet.

"You have that dumbass look on your face that usually means something happened with Billy," Dustin said, shrugging and smiling. The waitress came by and set a frosty glass of chocolate milk in front of him.

Steve sighed, rubbing at his thankfully already-fading headache.

"Great, I have a 'something happened with Billy' look? Specific to that scenario?" Steve asked. Dustin just nodded, sunshine grin making Steve reluctantly smile back. He looked away, trying to school his face. Steve fiddled with the handle of his coffee cup. "I... may have...kissed Billy."

"Oh?" Dustin said after a moment in a neutral tone.

"Look, mistletoe was involved!" Steve stated, keeping his eyes averted. "...As well as some alcohol."

"Hm," Dustin hummed thoughtfully, "Yeah, you can't mess with the sacred rules of mistletoe."

Steve jerked his head up to see the playful glint in Dustin's eye.

"Okay, har har asshole," he responded with a roll of his eyes, feeling the pressure suddenly disappear. Talking to Dustin was easy. He never made Steve feel stupid or like he'd done the wrong thing. Maybe he shouldn't be dumping all this relationship stuff on him, but Steve was grateful for the sympathetic ear, and sadly enough a guiding hand sometimes, too.

"And how do you feel?" Dustin asked, taking a drink from his glass.

"Guilty," Steve immediately responded. Dustin's eyebrows rose in surprise. Steve ducked his head, feeling exposed.

"Because you kissed a guy?" Dustin asked.

"No, that part was nice. Different, but in a good way," Steve mumbled, rubbing his jaw awkwardly. "I feel guilty because... because...I feel like, like, like there's this secret admirer who really likes me, who sees me, and tells me how they feel and about their mom and shit. And then there's Billy who's a giant dick, but his hands are so warm. And, like, how can I push away all the real emotional stuff that the secret admirer gives me for just the physical stuff from Billy? And the thing with Billy? That may never even happen again. I think the secret admirer deserves more... consideration than that."

Steve fell quiet, his breath panting out of him, his face hot. God, had that made any sense?

When Dustin remained silent, Steve peeked up at him in trepidation. The younger boy sat there staring straight at Steve with a strange look on his face, sympathy mixed with surprised unease. Steve's stomach dropped.

What the fuck does that look mean?

Dustin cleared his throat, looking down at his frosted glass, before taking a deep breath and brightening back up.

“Dude, I think you’re making this harder than it needs to be. You might be accepting notes and kisses and shit from different people, but you haven’t explicitly committed to anybody, right? It’s not like you’re dating Billy or your secret admirer,” Dustin said in his irreverent way, leaning over to poke Steve’s arm. The two locked eyes. “You haven’t done anything wrong. You’re fine.”

For a split second, Steve wanted to cry. The unconditional acceptance from Dustin made his eyes sting. In a bid to ignore it, he fished around for something to say.

“I think I want to try writing back to my secret admirer,” Steve blurted out. Wow, where the hell had that come from? “But I’m not sure how to actually get the letter to him.”

“Well, you could write a note, tape a piece of string to it, and leave the other end coming out of the vent in your locker,” he immediately responded, with a thoughtful look on his face.

“You been thinking a lot about this?” Steve asked with a grin. “But how will he know that it’s there? That it’s for him?”

“Maybe he won’t, but maybe he will,” Dustin answered vaguely. Steve eyed him over the rim of his coffee cup. Dustin was suddenly very interested in the quickly-melting frost on the outside of his glass, scratching his fingernail through the condensation. He brought the glass up for another drink, then looked over Steve’s shoulder as he lowered it again. “Anyways, are you done moping over Billy?”

“Why?” Steve asked suspiciously.

“Because he just walked in.”

Of fucking course he did.

“Harrington, nerdling. Mind if we join?” Billy said, eyeing Steve with a sharply delighted grin. He rested a hand on the back of Steve’s booth, leaning toward the table and causing his necklace to swing.

Behind him, Max was looking at him questioningly, clearly not expecting Billy to approach the two boys.

Steve cleared his throat, avoiding Billy's eyes and attempting to appear nonchalant.

What the hell was Billy doing here, acknowledging him and looking pleased to do it? God, shouldn't he be avoiding Steve at all cost? Isn't that what a guy would normally do when he gets kissed by another guy? Shit, Billy had kissed him back. Steve knew it was a bad idea to get out of bed this morning. He wanted to melt into the faux leather seat under him in mortification.

"Sure," he said. Son of a bitch.

Steve wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but it wasn't for Billy to slide into the booth beside him, stretching out his arm across the back of the seat and encompassing Steve's shoulders in the movement. He sat wide, arms and knees spread, right thigh pressing flush to Steve's left. Steve tried to surreptitiously put some room between them, edging closer to the window on his other side, but Billy was like the tide, rushing in to fill the areas Steve left empty. Steve suddenly felt surrounded by Billy. And after the kiss the night before, his body wasn't so sure that was a bad thing.

Steve took a sip from his cooling coffee, angling his left elbow out to keep the other boy at bay. He saw Dustin eyeballing them with glee, face turning from Steve to Billy and back again. Billy continued to watch him with that amused look, but Steve could feel the animal hunger just below the surface.

Or maybe he was projecting.

Billy slapped his notebook down on the table edge, hand firmly planted on it, slightly startling him. Steve realized it was the one he'd seen the other boy vigorously scribbling in during school, and he wondered if Billy always carried it around.

Across from them, Max had settled down next to Dustin, the two already off on some tangent involving hopefully-make-believe creatures. Steve saw the way Dustin's face lit up when talking to her,

even now when he'd accepted that she was only interested in friendship.

"So, Christmas break is coming up," Billy said, deep voice pouring into Steve's ear. "Any plans?"

Steve wondered incredulously if this was Billy trying to make small talk. Maybe he felt awkward too. Or maybe he was trying to put Steve at ease. Yeah, like that was ever going to happen with Billy's line of heat pressed up against his side. He struggled to keep himself from shuddering, or curling into it.

"Uh, not really. My parents will finally be back home, so we'll be doing the family Christmas thing," Steve said, still resolutely facing his coffee. "You?"

"My dad's always big on 'family time,' though it usually doesn't end well," he replied. Something in the tone of his voice reminded Steve of a tense conversation in a bathroom. He finally looked over at the other boy, face only inches away, and traced the rapidly fading marks on his skin in worry. He met Billy's eyes, suddenly enthralled and unable to look away. The heady scent of him, cologne and cigarettes, curled around Steve.

"Will it be bad?" he asked quietly, almost delicately, wondering where the words came from.

"Nah," Billy said, smile softening into something almost fond. The arm across his upper back almost felt comforting. "Not as long as I keep my mouth shut."

Steve barked out a laugh, then felt guilty at the inappropriate response.

"Right, because you're great at that," he said.

"I can be," Billy shot back, eyes tracing down to linger on Steve's mouth. Steve's own eyes flicked down.

He felt his breathing deepen as he watched Billy's tongue drag along his bottom lip. He'd felt that tongue, experienced that mouth dragging against his. He suddenly felt coiled taught, fighting against

himself to keep from leaning forward and tasting Billy again. A part of him didn't even care that they were out where anyone could see. He craved it, the need crawling through his core and up his throat, making him nearly moan out loud. God, what was wrong with him?

The waitress arriving with their food jolted them out of their intense staring contest. The plates clinked against the table as she set them down before turning to the two new people, promising more pancakes for Max and coffee for Billy. She set down extra sets of silverware then turned back to the kitchen.

Billy pulled out a fork and proceeded to cut into Steve's scrambled eggs. With a jolt, Steve realized that Billy was left-handed, his right arm remaining stretched out behind him.

"Hey!" Steve said, using his own fork to attempt to win back his breakfast. Billy dodged him, stuffing the forkful in his mouth and smiling winningly at Steve's shocked face.

"Get your own!" Steve said, flustered and indignant.

"Why, you going to eat all this?" Billy questioned derisively around his mouthful, motioning to the three plates full of food laid out in front of them.

"Yes!" Steve cried, slapping a piece of bacon out of the other boy's hand and stuffing it in his own mouth. He grabbed the plate and turned slightly away, determined to at least keep the bacon safe, even as Billy's right arm curled around his shoulders to pull him back. Picking up a second piece, he held it up to gloat, but Billy was looking at him with wide, sad eyes, his lips turning down in an exaggerated frown. Something in Steve's stomach clenched and warmed at the look. What the hell? How was he doing that? Asshole.

He rolled his eyes, face heating as he held the piece out to the other boy. A wicked grin broke across Billy's face as he leaned forward to take the piece from Steve's hand.

With his mouth.

Steve watched, slack-jawed, as Billy ate out of his hand, the piece

quickly disappearing and leaving a layer of greasy salt for Billy to lick off Steve's fingers.

Billy was licking Steve's fingers.

He ran the flat of his tongue down the digits, sucking his index finger into his mouth before drawing up it again. His eyes danced as he watched Steve from under his eyelashes.

A sharp kick from under the table brought him back to the present. He jerked himself away from the other boy for the second time, surprised that Max hadn't said anything. But Dustin, great friend that he was, was keeping her distracted while simultaneously shooting him incredulous looks.

Steve picked up his napkin, wiping his wet fingers on it, and once more tried to scoot away from Billy.

The waitress returned, setting down another mug and filling it with steaming coffee. The jolt back to reality shook him, and as she left, Steve attempted to tune back into the kids' conversation. He was determined to get back to some normalcy, not that anything had been normal since the night before.

God, Billy had been licking his fingers in public! Steve had been turned into his side, Billy's arm around him! They were practically cuddling!

He gave himself a mental shake.

The kids! The kids were talking about music. Or more specifically, Max was talking about music while Dustin attempted to keep up with the conversation. While Dustin was smart, his passions didn't exactly lead him to knowing much about music.

Luckily, Steve's did.

"My parents bring me back tapes when they go off on business trips. A few months ago my dad brought back The Cars' newest cassette. Came out earlier this year. They're like rock/power pop. You'd probably like them, Max," Steve said, going for nonchalant.

Steve felt Billy's arm slip down his back and curl around his waist, fingers digging into a ticklish spot as he continued to eat off Steve's plate. Steve twitched away from the prodding digits, gripping the offending hand as hard as he could.

"In fact, I think they have a few songs in the jukebox here. Want to see?" he asked, almost desperately.

"Sure," Max said slowly, giving Steve a strange look. She got up, digging in her pockets for change.

Steve tried to follow her, but found his way blocked by a certain mullet-wearing asshole. He hunched half-standing in the booth, kicking at Billy's leg.

"Move!" he said. Billy just looked up at him with a sleazy grin, slumping far down in the booth and resting his head back against the low seat.

Son of a bitch.

Huffing, Steve tried to climb over his spread legs. The arrangement put him in an awkward situation, practically straddling Billy and dangerously close to losing his balance. He placed a hand on the other boy's shoulder, planting his knee on the booth on the far side of Billy. As he went to swing around, he felt a hand land on his ass, cupping and helping to lift him over. Startled, he jerked his head up to see Billy give him a lascivious wink. He scowled at him, smacking at the hand on his ass and practically tumbling the rest of the way into freedom.

Once standing, he ran a hand through his hair. He grimaced at both Billy starfished across the booth and Dustin trying and failing to look like he wasn't enthralled with watching them. Max stood beside Steve, staring at Billy like he'd lost his mind. To her, he probably had.

They gave each other a look, and turned towards the other side of the diner where the jukebox sat.

As Steve stood talking with Max, flipping through albums, he peeked

over his shoulder at Billy.

Billy, who was hunched over his notebook with his back to Steve, writing furiously like he couldn't get the words out fast enough. Dustin's head was bent toward him, face oddly serious for a kid with such a sunny disposition. Steve wondered what they were talking about. It's the second time he'd seen them alone with each other, and he worried that they wouldn't get along. But despite the intense atmosphere at the table, the two seemed to be conversing civilly.

"Steve?" Max called. He turned back to her and the jukebox, smiling at her questioning look.

Hours later, after an afternoon spent sitting on the Hendersons' couch and watching shitty reruns, Steve made his way back home.

The low-sitting sun hit him in the eyes as he turned onto his street, and he grappled for his sunglasses in the cup holder. His fingers grasped the hard plastic, and something else. Something paper. What the fuck? He pulled the glasses on, tucking the paper under his thigh for safekeeping the last few minutes of his ride. He pulled it back out once he was parked, frowning down at it in confusion. Opening it up, he stared in shocked surprise at the note.

Hey Sunshine,

I'm sure you weren't expecting to get this note from me today, but at this rate I'm counting on you not minding them. I just had to tell you how much I loved seeing you at the party last night. It was amazing, getting to watch you outside of school. Getting to be close to you, even if you didn't know it was me. I was there, dancing in the crowd. For a moment, frozen forever in my memory, it was almost like we were dancing together. I can still feel the heat of you, pressed up against me. There were so many people crowded in that room, it was impossible to move without touching.

But knowing that it was you gives me goosebumps. God, my cock was so hard that night after touching you. I wanted to reach out and take your hand, guide it down my stomach and into my pants. I almost told you that it was me. I'd had enough alcohol that night, I could have stood right in front of you and confessed. Confessed how I feel about you, begged you to feel the same. Begged you to let me taste you, your mouth, your skin, your cock. Just a taste. But a taste is never enough, is it? It leaves you wanting more, aching and hard and pulsing with the need to have and take and never let go. Fuck. Fuck, I have to go. I hope I get the opportunity to be close to you like that again.

Your Secret Admirer

PS – that crop top made me want to lick a wet stripe up your spine. You should wear them more often.

Hidden under the paper in the cup holder was a vending machine prize container, the same kind that came from the gumball machine right inside the door of the diner. In it was a bright pink plastic skull ring.

Holy fucking shit.

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

AHHH I'M SO SORRY IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE THE LAST CHAPTER! There was Christmas, then I got the flu over New Year's which was NOT FUN. And now it's my birthday! Or, well, it will be in 15 mins. :)

Thanks to @jgoose13 for being the best beta ever. I'm on tumblr @fullofwander.

Steve wandered through his house in a daze, clutching the new note in his fist in confusion.

What the fuck?

Who could have given him this note? And how?

Whoever it was had to have been at the diner. It's the only time they would have been able to get into his car. But there hadn't been hardly anybody at the diner. Had there? He remembers seeing an older couple in a corner, and the cook and waitress, and Billy, Dustin, and Max. That was it.

Maybe his secret admirer had only been in the parking lot? Or at Dustin's house? Spying on him through the windows? Following him?

A spike of unease went through him at the creepy thought, but quickly dissipated. No. Whoever it was would have needed his keys, so they would've had to come in the diner.

Maybe he's just that dumb and somebody else did come in and steal and return his keys without him noticing.

He slumped down on the couch, face scrunching in confused concentration.

The only other explanation is that Dustin left the note. Which was ridiculous. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility for a younger boy

to have a crush on him, and Dustin certainly had the intelligence to pull all this off, but even the brief thought made Steve feel slightly nauseated. Dustin was his brother. His way-too-young brother.

And he knew for a fact that flower pressing wasn't his or Mrs. Henderson's thing. Thank god.

But that leaves him back at square one.

Steve twirled the pink plastic skull ring around his finger. It was small, probably meant for a little kid, but it fit his pinky well enough. He knew it came from the diner. He'd walked past the machine full of skull rings and plastic soldiers and other toys plenty of times to recognize it.

It was another bit of proof that his secret admirer had to have been in the diner. Probably.

He thought back to that morning, standing with Max at the jukebox and looking over his shoulder to see Billy scribbling in his notebook across from Dustin. He always seemed to be writing in it. But surely not love notes to Steve.

Right?

He could still feel the wet heat of Billy's mouth licking his fingers, fuck, and kissing him the night before. His warm hands touching Steve, grabbing and holding and running over his exposed skin. Hell, even the thought of Billy grabbing his ass that morning at the diner had Steve red-faced and close to panting. Jesus.

Okay, maybe it wouldn't be so wild for Billy to be attracted to him. But to write him love notes? Was Billy capable of those kinds of emotions? Could he really want Steve to have the kinds of things his secret admirer talked about? Did he really think he deserved whatever he wanted in life?

It didn't match up with the Billy he knew in person.

Except, he already knew that Billy hid parts of himself, the part that gets hit by his dad, the part that likes to kiss Steve.

Son of a bitch, what the fuck.

Steve ran his hands through his hair, before stomping his way up to his bedroom to pour over the older letters for clues. Again.

There were several times when Billy's behavior could possibly coincide with what was written in the letters. There was the time Billy had wiped chocolate off the corner of his mouth the day before his secret admirer had said he'd almost stolen a taste of Steve, and mentioned chocolate as well. Or how about when Billy had supposedly picked a fight with his father, resulting in him getting smacked around a bit? That had happened after his secret admirer had confessed that he was a guy, and before Steve had been able to answer if he was okay with that since he had gotten sick and missed school. It was all suspicious, he supposed, but none of it was hard evidence. And in this latest note it talked about how his secret admirer had danced with him at the party. Billy had danced with him. But that dance floor had been so jam packed with people.

Steve sighed, hunched over his desk and rubbing his forehead in consternation. He'd thought circles around himself this evening, and he didn't think he was going to find anymore clarity that night. Time to set it aside and think about something else.

Like studying for next week's midterms.

Or figuring out what he was going to write in his own note.

Fuck.

The next morning Steve once again sat at his desk, staring down at the paper before him, uncomfortable and slightly embarrassed. He'd been trying to write his own note all morning long, with little success. A quickly-growing pile of balled up paper sat next to him, marking his failure.

He didn't know how his secret admirer did it. Pouring out your heart, or at least cracking it open a bit on paper, was hard. Much harder

than he'd thought it would be. Talking about his feelings seemed almost easy compared to this. To write it down, he actually had to think about it and organize his thoughts. And afterward, there's a physical manifestation of what he feels. He didn't know if he liked it. What if it sounded dumb? What if he doesn't write it right and his secret admirer doesn't understand what he's trying to say?

Fuck, what *is* he trying to say?

It didn't help that every time he started to get into a groove, he found himself thinking about Billy. Imagined Billy reading it. And while he may have his suspicions, he didn't want to write anything that was too obviously about the other boy, just in case. But seriously, how many boys in Hawkins would actually do something about liking other boys?

He wrote another line, grimaced at it, and then erased it. Again.

The sound of a car pulling into his driveway momentarily distracted him. His parents were home for Christmas. Great. He sighed, setting his pencil down and stretching.

Fuck, his parents. They'd want to rehash in person everything he'd been doing the last few weeks, and keep him as a captive audience while they told their own stories. Jesus.

Thank God he only has to deal with going to school through Wednesday.

By the time Monday morning rolled around, he finally had a completed letter. It wasn't his greatest piece of writing, and he didn't know if he'd ever get over the embarrassment of writing it, but he was determined to see it through. He'd tucked it safely into his school things the night before, though that didn't stop Steve from feeling like there was a small fire on his back seat that he couldn't ignore.

"Okay, why are you so twitchy this morning?" Dustin asked during the ride to school. Steve grasped the steering wheel with both hands,

twisting back and forth.

"I wrote the letter," he mumbled, keeping his eyes forward, "for my secret admirer."

"Yeah?" Dustin asked, sounding way more excited than Steve thought he should be.

"Yeah," he said, a sudden pang of nerves squeezing his stomach. "But I'm still not sure how he's going to know to look for it. I already taped a piece of string to it, but how's he going to know to pull on the end sticking out of the vent?"

"Oh, something tells me he'll figure it out!" Dustin said in an eager, chipper tone.

A spike of annoyance went through Steve, surprising him in its vehemence. Suddenly, the stress of everything, what Steve did know and what he didn't, boiled over.

"What does that mean? Dammit Dustin, why do I feel like you're not telling me something?" Steve asked in exasperation, slapping his palm against the steering wheel. His voice steadily rose with each question. "Did you know I found a note from my secret admirer in my car when I got home from your house on Saturday? How the fuck did a note end up in my car? Got any ideas about that? The only people in my car that day were me and you! And it had a plastic ring with it, one of those from the machine in the diner. You know, the diner that you, me, Max, and Billy fucking Hargrove were sitting in that same morning? How the fuck did that end up in my car? And what were you and Billy talking so intently about at the diner anyways?"

A brief moment of silence echoed through the car, awkward and terrible in its suddenness.

Aw shit, he didn't mean to unload like that on the kid.

Dustin had turned and was staring at Steve with wide, concerned eyes, and an unsure look on his face. Steve blew out a huge breath.

"Sorry man, that was uncalled for," he said, rubbing a hand down his

face and glancing at Dustin with a grimace. “Relationships aren’t supposed to be this hard! Even when I was working for it with Nancy, at least we were talking face to face and I could gauge where I stood with her. Now, I’m just constantly lost, or confused, or unsure, about everything.”

Dustin was quiet for a few moments, processing what Steve had said and seeming to weigh his own words carefully.

“I think, maybe, you’re worrying too much about it?” Dustin said, tone low and soothing. “No, no, hear me out. It sucks you’re so stressed out about this. That you have to put up with this bullshit. But, if I were you I’d try to enjoy it. You have someone who truly likes you, even if it is a guy. Just, like, take a deep breath and enjoy being the center of someone’s attention. You deserve it.”

They sat in silence the rest of the way to school, Dustin fidgeting awkwardly with his bag, his hat, his cuffs. Guilt squeezed Steve’s heart and clawed up his throat, but he wasn’t sure how to make it better. Maybe Dustin was right. Maybe he needed to take a step back and let himself have fun. But he couldn’t help but want whatever was happening to be serious, not just another fling. The real question, though, is did he want the serious thing with his secret admirer, or with Billy?

“Hey, we good?” Steve asked after he parked the car, reaching to touch Dustin’s arm before he could climb out.

“Yeah. You’re still kind of an asshole, but we’re good,” Dustin replied, his toothy smile slowly breaking across his face in relief.

The two boys climbed out of the car, exchanging farewells before going their separate ways.

It was only after he’d gotten to his locker that he realized Dustin had only referred to one person liking Steve. He couldn’t stop himself from wondering who Dustin was referring to—his secret admirer or Billy.

Steve tried to take Dustin's advice and relax, tried not to let his thoughts preoccupy him through the day. He'd written his letter. It was done and waiting for him to tape it up before his last class of the day. He figured that would be a good time to leave it, since his secret admirer seemed to like that time of day to slip his own notes.

Instead, he turned his attention back to Billy.

Billy, who had been staring at him at and making alternating lewd and flirty faces at him all day, more playful than he'd ever been with Steve before. Honestly, Steve didn't know what to think. Something fundamental had changed between them over the weekend, instigated by the kiss they'd shared. The charge in the air had exploded over them. Billy's eyes left lines of fire where they touched him, and his close presence made it feel like Steve was drowning. The brief touches they'd shared had nearly left him shaking apart into pieces. The storm had come, sweeping over Steve and leaving him breathless.

Jesus, he was getting downright poetic these days.

It had been three days since he'd kissed Billy and holy shit was he really counting the days? Apparently so. How was he supposed to act now? Normal? What was normal?

Right, relax. Chill the fuck out.

His new motto was tested at lunch, however, when Billy unceremoniously sat down beside him.

Steve had been sitting alone, absently crinkling the empty chip bag he'd just dumped on his plate, when he was enveloped in the overpowering scent of Billy. With a jolt Steve realized it was becoming quite familiar to him; like a Pavlovian response, he couldn't help the shiver that went down his spine.

Billy sidled up, strutting slow and even, thumbs hooked into his front belt loops. Steve couldn't help but watch his hips roll as he approached the table, muscular thighs moving under tight jeans as he

sat down in the chair next to Steve and scooted close. Of course.

“So what’s for lunch?” Billy asked, reaching to steal a chip off Steve’s plate.

It didn’t escape his notice that Billy sat down empty-handed, and he was suddenly worried that the other boy didn’t have a lunch. He turned and locked eyes with Billy, watching in concern as he obnoxiously crunched a chip before reaching for a second one. Instead of smacking his wandering fingers like he’d done before, Steve turned back to his tray, picking up one half of his sandwich and handed it over.

“Half a turkey sandwich?” Steve offered. Billy took it with a grin, purposefully knocking their knees together under the table. Steve rolled his eyes, but couldn’t stop himself from pressing back, reveling in the line of heat where their thighs pressed together. Thank God they were sitting on the edge of the room, their backs to a wall.

Across the cafeteria Nancy and Jonathan were making their way toward them with their trays, Nancy pausing momentarily in bewilderment when she spotted Billy next to Steve. Steve was surprised to feel the boy beside him tensing slightly, as if in preparation for a confrontation.

Wow, was he extra guarded around the other two, or was he just that relaxed around Steve?

Nancy sat down with a wary look at Billy, apparently remembering at least some of the harsh words exchanged Friday night. Jonathan, on the other hand, seemed remarkably unperturbed at their new lunch addition. A sudden swell of affection for Jonathan bubbled up in Steve, and he watched with a small smile as the two sat down. Jonathan gave him an answering grin, before nodding at Billy in greeting.

“Freak, princess,” Billy said, acknowledging the two with his usual blasé attitude. Steve smacked him on the arm, and Billy turned to him with a wicked flash of teeth. “Pretty boy.”

“Billy,” Nancy answered, before she turned her attention to Steve.

“So are your parents home for Christmas?”

“Uh, yeah, they got home last night,” he answered absently, watching Billy practically inhale his half of the sandwich. He nudged the plate of chips over in front of Billy before taking a bite of his own half a sandwich. “Mom’s all worried because we haven’t put a tree up yet. Like that’s going to make it feel more home-y or Christmas-y or some shit. You guys got any big plans?”

“Nothing exciting,” Nancy answered. “We’re going to visit my grandparents next week, but that’s not so much fun as sheer torture. I wish I could stay here, honestly.”

“Too bad your parents won’t let you stay with us,” Jonathan interjected. “It’s just going to be the three of us, again.”

While they talked, Billy spotted Steve’s hand and picked it up, looking at the pink skull ring on his pinky he’d neglected to take off. He raised an eyebrow and grinned playfully, saying plenty without actually speaking. Steve scowled, jerking his hand out of the other boy’s grip and ignoring his look. He picked up his apple, viciously biting into it.

Billy’s hand dropped. And landed on Steve’s thigh.

Steve barely kept himself from jumping, freezing up completely at the touch and nearly inhaling a piece of apple. He sat there, uncomprehending, as Billy’s broad palm seemed to radiate heat that sunk into his very bones. After a moment of complete stillness, his attention snapped back into focus, and he slowly began to chew again, very carefully studying the apple in his hand and not making eye contact with anyone.

Shit, what the fuck should he do?

Part of him, a very small part, wanted to spread his thighs and see what happened. The larger, more rational part of his brain knew that lunch in the school cafeteria was not the time nor the place, and resented Billy a little bit for putting him in this situation.

The fingers on his leg began to drum a pattern, moving higher and

toward his inseam, rubbing slow and enticing circles. Heat bloomed in Steve, burning low in him. Certain parts of him were becoming very interested in what was happening, and he couldn't help but think he was seriously close to embarrassing himself in a whole new way soon.

Half in a panic, Steve slapped his hand down on top of the wandering one, clutching the fingers to still them. Beside him, Billy was completely unfazed, steadily making his way through the plate of chips, licking the salt from his other hand.

Asshole.

Billy moved the hand on Steve's thigh again, this time slotting his fingers with Steve's and giving them a gentle squeeze before settling down again.

Steve sat there, unbelieving, holding Billy's hand under the lunch table.

For some reason, the act felt way more intimate than anything else they'd done up to that point. Billy wasn't trying to get a rise out of him; they weren't actively pursuing anything physical. They were just sitting there. Holding hands.

What the fuck?

He continued to eat his apple, unwilling to upset the moment, twitching slightly every time Billy would absently run his thumb over the sensitive skin on the inside of Steve's wrist. Jesus, did he have an erogenous zone there or something?

Billy gave one last squeeze to his hand before slipping away when the bell finally rang. He produced two lollipops from who-knows-where, handing one to Steve before sucking the other lewdly into his mouth with a wicked wink and sauntering away to his next class.

Steve definitely didn't watch his firm ass sway as he left. He did not.

Spurred on by thoughts of the strange lunch, the rest of the afternoon flew by for Steve. He blinked and found himself standing in front of his locker before his last class of the day, stomach clenching as he pulled out the note he had written. He smoothed it between his fingers, pressing and attempting to straighten the edges that had been accidentally crumpled.

Fuck, was he really going to do this?

He mulled over what he had written.

Dear Secret Admirer,

I'm not quite sure how to write one of these. I hope you find this note okay. I'm not sure how you'd know to look for it, but hopefully no one else finds it instead. I just wanted to be able to tell you myself how much I enjoy your notes. They mean a lot to me. I can't help but find myself looking forward to the end of the day, hoping and hoping there's one waiting for me. You make me feel special. Although, I don't always think I deserve the things you say I do. I've done some things I'm not proud of in the past, but I'm trying to be a better person. I'm not going to lie—I've been kind of freaking out about this whole secret admirer thing. You being a guy threw me for a loop, but it's not just that. It's more that I feel like you see me a lot more clearly than other people do, but I don't really know anything about you at all. I feel starved for information about you. Sometimes, you don't feel like a real person to me. But then you write about what you want for me, and how you want to touch me, and it makes me feel excited and jittery all at once. And sad, because sometimes all I want is a hug. I hope we can find a way to actually talk to each other more, because as much as I love your letters, I can't help but want more. Please.

S.

Steve looked once more at the letter in his hand, carefully folded into a soft green stationary envelope he'd lifted from his mom's desk. He sat it in his locker, fed the string up through the vent, and carefully closed the metal door.

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow so that took a while! Hopefully, some of you are still with me! Thanks so much for all the encouraging words, the comments on here and in my tumblr inbox! I may not respond, but I definitely think about them, a LOT. Many thanks to @jgoose13 as always! I'm on tumblr @fullofwander.

(And YES, things should really start getting good now!)

By Tuesday afternoon, Steve was a nervous mess. But what else was new these days?

Jesus, had it really only been two weeks, to the day, since he'd received the first note from his secret admirer? And now look at him, in the middle of some sort of second sexual awakening. He'd kissed a boy, for fuck's sake, and not even the one who's writing him love notes. Probably.

His mind constantly bounced between remembering the feel of Billy's lips on his and his secret admirer's written admissions— *that crop top made me want to lick a wet stripe up your spine* . The last time he'd felt this out of control had been months ago, when he was trying to protect a bunch of dumb kids from real monsters.

And now he'd written his own note back to his secret admirer, and waiting for a response was like a steel hand wrapped around his stomach.

His emotional turmoil was even starting to make itself known to other people. Like Nancy, who knew him well enough after the past 2 years to see that his mind wasn't exactly calm and present. But it wasn't her job to take care of Steve--not anymore, maybe it had never been--and he found himself feeling guilty that she could tell something was going on with him.

"So you're coming to the drive-in theater with us tomorrow night, right?" she asked him at lunch that day, in another clear attempt at distracting him.

"Yeah, sure," Steve responded absently, trying not to look like he was searching for Billy. The other boy had been noticeably absent from Steve's day. He'd somehow become such a staple in Steve's everyday life that it was distressingly obvious when he was keeping his distance.

Steve might have even packed a slightly larger lunch for himself than usual, just in case the other boy showed up without food again. He'd steadily ignored the warm feeling blooming in his chest that morning as he'd made and wrapped two different kinds of sandwiches, telling himself he was just indecisive about his own lunch and wanted options that day.

But Billy was nowhere in sight now that it was lunchtime. Hell, the only glimpse Steve had gotten of him all day had been at the edges of his peripheral, skulking down the hallways and ducking in and out of classrooms just as the bell rang, almost like he was being hunted. Like he was afraid of being caught out.

Steve wondered if that was the truth of it, then wondered why Billy would want to avoid him. He'd done this to Steve a few times over

the past few weeks, and a pattern was only just now starting to emerge if he looked closely enough. Billy avoiding him...tended to line up with certain letters from his secret admirer. Just this last weekend Steve had gone over the letters, comparing his interactions with Billy with the letters, and Billy's behavior today was just making him wonder even more.

Just yesterday, Billy had been practically plastered to his side at lunch. Steve was a physical person himself—he enjoyed the casual intimacy of sitting close with someone, throwing a friendly arm over their shoulder—something he *thought* he'd communicated in his own letter the day before with his hug comment. And now here he was, bereft of even that small bit of contact.

Could Billy be his secret admirer? Would it change anything for Steve? He didn't think so. Honestly, the thought of the letters being from Billy actually made Steve feel a little bit of...relief, like his shoulders could finally unclench. But it also brought longing, so much so that he felt exposed, wide open with it. He'd spent so much energy lately thinking about Billy, and at this point the thought of investing that much into someone *else* was unimaginable to Steve.

If he was *really* honest, Billy's absence that day left him with a lack of warmth. He didn't know quite what to do with himself without his needling, to the point that his own loneliness suddenly lanced through him. The sharp shock surprised him with its intensity, and he swallowed and blinked hard at the feeling. Steve mentally shook himself, willing the sensation away.

Mid-afternoon on a Tuesday at school was not the time to have a sudden emotional breakdown. Besides, there was still his secret admirer's—*Billy's*?—response to look forward to. Fucking fuck.

He forcefully turned himself back to Nancy and the current conversation. Which included third-wheeling it to the drive-in with her and Jonathan. Great. When had he agreed to that? His over-full lunchbox sat in front of him, mockingly. Well, at least he had his choice of turkey or ham.

De spite sharing the last class of the day with Billy, Steve never actually saw the other boy come into the room. It wasn't until several minutes after class had started that he turned and briefly caught sight of the other boy, bent over his exam and scribbling away. Steve's heart gave a lurch at the sight of him, the feeling leaving him slightly breathless and surprised. *That* had certainly never happened before, especially because of Billy. Steve quickly turned back to his own essay.

It wasn't until the end of class that Billy finally allowed a look to linger, as he was once again ducking out of the room. He paused with a hand on the door jam, turning to look fully at Steve who was still fiddling with his things. Billy's eyes took him in, raking down his form and back up again in that enticing way he had, before a small smile curled the corner of his mouth. He winked in Steve's direction, then he turned and strolled out of the room.

Steve shivered at the other boy's intensity, angry at himself for being so moody all day while Billy was calm and casual, appearing to be highly unconcerned with anything.

Finally gathering his things into his arms, Steve made his way out of

the classroom and towards his locker, his brain switching gears from Billy to his secret admirer like a pavlovian response. He forced himself to keep a calm, steady pace down the hall. He most definitely *wasn't* twisting a pink skull ring around and around his pinky.

Steve didn't know if he loved or hated this moment, standing in front of his unopened locker at the end of the school day, not knowing if there would be a note waiting for him. Since that very first note, the end of each school day had brought this feeling. Of course, today was a little different. This time, he would receive a response to his own note. Or not. Instead of just passively receiving a note from this other guy, they were going to be participating in a written conversation. Almost. Kind of. If he even wrote back, that is.

Shut the fuck up. Of course he wrote back. The dude likes you. Like, really really likes you. Right, chill the fuck out.

As he opened the metal door, familiar sheets of folded paper were there to greet him, and he pretended the whoosh of air he let out wasn't one of relief.

Hey Sunshine,

Thank you for your letter. You really have no idea what it means to me to know that you want to talk to me. That you crave what I give you. I wish I could give you more. I wish I could wrap my arms around you right in front of everyone and stake my claim. You don't know how many times I've almost done it over the last few weeks. I'm sorry I'm not more brave. You say you've done bad things. I've heard the rumors, the stories. I can guarantee you I've done worse. I'm not generally considered a good

person. I know that. But you are. You're kind, and honest, and brave. You've made mistakes in the past, but I see you working every day to make up for them. And you do. You DO deserve the things you want. Took everything in me not to come up to you today and hug you as hard as I could. I had to force myself to turn away from you several times. I didn't trust myself to be in your vicinity. So don't worry. I'm closer than you think. And you know me better than you think. If you can, I'd like it if you would write me again tomorrow. It's the last day before winter break, and I'd like to hear from you again. I'm not sure how to keep in contact with you over the break, but I don't want us to just fall out of contact. Write me tomorrow, and tell me it's okay for me to sneak letters to you over the break, sweetheart. Besides, how else am I supposed to give you your Christmas present?

Love,

Your Secret Admirer

Steve slumped next to his open locker, note clutched in his hand. God, that ache was back, the one deep in his chest that made him want to laugh and cry and hug someone as hard as he could all at once. He could feel the edges of his mouth turning up in a smile, and hoped it didn't come off as too besotted. Seriously, what the hell was happening to him?

But damn, it felt good to know that someone thought of him as a good person. He knew that the world wasn't black and white, wasn't divided up into purely good and bad people. He'd had more than enough experience with that just over the last two years. So he couldn't help but take his secret admirer's opinion of himself with a grain of salt. After all, everything he'd ever said in his letters to Steve had been full of care and concern, right from the very beginning. He could definitely see Billy as the type of person to describe himself as

a “bad person”.

Another line from the letter tugged at Steve’s mind. *I didn’t trust myself to be in your vicinity* . Steve thought of Billy, and the way he’d avoided Steve all day long. He rubbed a hand over his face, trying to will away the heat he could feel rising there. Suddenly, he was in a much better mood.

These thoughts followed him all the way out to his car, where Dustin was already there, waiting for a ride.

“You seem awfully happy,” Dustin said after they’d climbed in the car and peeled out of the lot.

“I am,” Steve replied. He chewed the corner of his lip before continuing, “I got a response to my letter.”

“Oh?” Dustin perked up in his seat. The poor boy had been with him on the crazy ride from the start, and Steve figured he owed him more than he’d ever be able to repay. Fuck, he really needed to make some friends his own age.

“Yeah. And I’m sorry about losing my shit yesterday,” Steve said, wincing as he glanced at the younger boy.

Dustin flapped his hand, waving the comment away. Teasingly, Steve mirrored the movement.

“Whatever, dude, you have a lot going on. You’re allowed to be a little on edge,” he said, his eyes lighting up bright in his face. “What did your secret admirer say?”

“He said he’s close to me, and that I know him better than I think,” Steve responded. Not for the first time he thought of piercing blue eyes, of a warm muscular body pressed too close for decency.

Steve let out a deep breath.

“D’you,” Steve started, then hesitated, not sure if he should ask. But despite his sheepishness, he wanted to know what Dustin thought. “Do you think, that there’s a possibility, that it might be Billy? It’s just—he always seems to be there! And the way he looks at me? Surely two different guys wouldn’t suddenly start showing interest in me at the same time.”

Silence descended in the car, only broken by the rhythmic clicking of the turn signal as Dustin took his time thinking.

“Look,” Dustin said, pushing his hat up his forehead to peer at Steve earnestly. “I’m going to ask you a question and I want you to be completely honest with me.”

“Sure, buddy,” Steve replied, smiling small and crooked at him.

“Do you *want* your secret admirer to be Billy?” he asked, an echo of what Steve had questioned himself earlier in the day. At Steve’s appraising look, he continued. “I’m not blind, dude. I’ve seen the two of you together the past few weeks.”

Well, Dustin is intuitive, Steve thought wryly.

“You’re pretty smart, you know that?” Steve said absently.

“Yeah, I know,” Dustin countered with a tone that suggested he didn’t think Steve was all that intelligent at the moment.

Steve reached over and affectionately flicked the brim of his hat.

“I wouldn’t mind if Billy turned out to be my secret admirer. I wouldn’t mind at all,” Steve murmured, suddenly eager to get home and write his next note.

The second note was easier for Steve to write. He wasn’t as anxious about putting his emotions out there, though he still worried the wrong person would find his note.

Dear Secret Admirer,

I'm glad you want to keep talking to me over the break. I'm not sure either how to go about doing that, but I'll keep an eye out. I think I'd also like to continue writing to you over the break. There's always my mailbox, but I can't guarantee that my parents won't check it. Maybe you can hide a note near my car? I still don't know how you got that one note into my cupholder last weekend. It's funny, I've never been sad for a semester to end, but I think I am this time. Getting these notes from you these last 2 weeks have really made me feel special. Like there's someone in my corner, wanting me and cheering me on. I haven't always had that, or been good at doing that for the people I care about. But I do want to tell you one thing--I've seen true monsters, and bad people doing bad things, and I highly doubt you're one of them. How could a bad guy write such heartfelt things to me? I guess, people aren't black and white. Maybe not you, and definitely not me. But you're right, I'm trying to make amends for my past mistakes. If you don't want to be such a bad guy, maybe you should try too. I do have to confess one thing to you. Last weekend I kissed another boy. It was nice, which just made me feel guilty towards you and him both. I'm not telling you to make you mad or jealous. I just thought that I should be honest with you, especially considering some of the things you've written to me. I hope this doesn't change anything, because your letters are one of the major highlights of my day. I'll be at the drive-in theater tonight, celebrating the end of the semester with my friends. Maybe, if you're there, I'll hear from you. Until then, I'll be waiting.

S.

Steve spent a ridiculous amount of time trying to decide if signing off with 'love' was too much, before eventually jotting down his initial. Once again, the letter went into a swiped envelope and was strategically placed in his locker before the last class of the day (and

semester).

As Steve left the school building that afternoon, he felt oddly free. The semester was over, he'd written back to his secret admirer, and Billy hadn't been avoiding him all day.

In fact, Billy was already in the parking lot, leaning against the hood of his blue Camaro and smoking, watching Steve approach avidly. Steve took in a large breath of cold December air, letting it out in a woosh. He strutted up to Billy, smiling widely. *It must be infectious*, Steve thought, as Billy's own mouth tugged up in the corner.

The thought pleased him, that his smile could affect Billy so. On a whim, Steve hopped up on the hood next to Billy, earning raised eyebrows at his boldness.

"Bum a smoke?" he asked, holding out his hand expectantly. Billy's grin widened.

"Guess I'm a bad influence," Billy responded unapologetically, holding out the pack to Steve, then flicking his lighter open with a snick. Steve bent close to the flame, coyly looking up through his lashes at Billy as he inhaled.

His mood was buoyed. For the first time in what seemed like forever, he felt like his old, confident self, the one who had no problem initiating the game.

“You are a bad influence,” he said around a mouthful of smoke. “You make me think about doing all sorts of things I shouldn't think of.”

“Oh really?” Billy responded. He was clearly intrigued at this new side of Steve, leaning close to bump their shoulders together. “Care to share with the class?”

Steve just smiled wider, eyes dancing, bumping shoulders back and turning to look out over the quickly-emptying parking lot. A few yards away, Nancy was climbing into Jonathan's car. She caught his eyes and waved. He waved back.

“So what are you doing tonight?” Steve asked, choosing to ignore Billy's own question.

“Dunno, I figured someone would be throwing a party tonight, but I haven't heard anything,” Billy answered on a sigh. He scratched his stubble with the hand holding his cigarette, and Steve watched the tip of it bob in the air. “Probably swipe some beer and find a nice secluded spot for myself.”

“It's the last day of school!” Steve said teasingly. “You should do something besides get drunk, alone, like a loser!”

“Okay, big shot, what are *you* doing tonight?” Billy said, flicking the remains of his cigarette to the ground before scooting back to lean on his elbows on the hood.

"I'm going to the drive in with Nancy and Jonathan," Steve responded, already wincing as he said it out loud.

"Oh, being a third wheel is better than being alone?" Billy teased back.

"Well, maybe you should come too," Steve said. The words surprised him. He didn't know where they came from, but now that he'd said them, he knew it's what he wanted. His smile gentled as he leaned back next to Billy, once more pressing their shoulders together. "Then you wouldn't be alone and I wouldn't be a third wheel."

"You asking me out, Harrington?" Billy said, the words rumbling low in his chest. That tone, fuck, it always made Steve shiver.

"I'm asking you to *chill* tonight, Hargrove," Steve said, his own voice going soft and smooth. He craned his neck to stare at the side of Billy's face, tracing his dangling earring up his neck.

"Maybe I will," Billy murmured, turning his head to lock eyes with Steve. They sat there like that for a moment, sharing a heated gaze loaded with things unsaid and promises of what could come. Steve willed his own eyes not to flick to Billy's lips, even as he saw the other boy's tongue flick out of the corner of his eye. This moment wasn't about that.

The conversation eased off into silent companionship. The two boys sat there contentedly, leaning back against the car and watching the

flow of student traffic slow to a trickle around them.